



EFN Policy Statement on Micro-Credentials

The EFN and the EFN Members, recognising the importance of upskilling and reskilling as a means of improving the quality and safety of nursing care, welcome the focus of the European Commission on Skills since the launch of the [2020 EU skills agenda](#). As a pillar of this EU agenda, the European Commission conceptualised a [European Approach to Micro-Credentials](#). Despite recognising that Micro-Credentials might have some potential benefits in facilitating upskilling and reskilling, and while reaffirming that further education and specialisation should take place within higher education which provides ECTS, the EFN and the EFN Members are concerned that employers might prefer short and inexpensive education, rather than formalised education programs that provide ECTS, which would also shift the flexibility burden to the nurses, who would then need to take these courses in their own spare time.

From an EU Policy perspective, building on the [European Commission's 2020 EU skills agenda](#), and on the [European Pillar of Social Rights' First Pillar: "Education, Training, and Life-Long Learning"](#), which emphasises the need to develop a European Framework on Micro-Credentials, the [European Commission](#) (2021), outlined the 10 key principles of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials, which are strongly supported by the EFN:

- 1) **Quality**, emphasising the need for micro-credentials to be fit-for purpose;
- 2) **Transparency**, stressing that micro-credentials must be easily measurable, comparable and understandable;
- 3) **Relevance**, emphasising that micro-credentials should reflect the real-world needs of the learner;
- 4) **Valid Assessment**, emphasising the need to assess learning outcomes against transparent standards;
- 5) **Learning Pathways**, stressing that they should support flexible learning pathways, including by enabling learners to stack them;
- 6) **Recognition**, underlining that micro-credentials must be easily comparable across the EU;
- 7) **Portability**, which stresses that micro-credentials are owned by the learner and that they can be stored in digital wallets;
- 8) **Learner-centred**, as micro-credentials must meet the needs of the targeted group of learners;
- 9) **Authentic**, containing enough adequate information on the issuer and the learner;
- 10) **Information and Guidance**, providing guidance on lifelong learning opportunities.

Reinforcing the position of the European Commission, in 2022 the Council of the EU adopted the [Council Recommendation on a European approach to Micro-Credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#). The Council of the EU (2022) states that Micro-Credentials should make it easier for individuals to quickly gain access to new skills, while not replacing and undermining full degree programmes and traditional qualifications. Furthermore, it adds that Micro-Credentials must be underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity and that whenever possible, Micro-Credentials should be described in ECTS. [The connection between Micro-Credentials and ECTS can occur in several ways](#), including ***Credit Recognition***, when higher-education institutions assign ECTS credits to Micro-Credential programs, facilitating the recognition of micro-credentials within the European education system and enabling students to transfer credits between programs; ***Integration into Degree Programs***, when higher-education institutions offer Micro-Credentials as part of their degree programs or as standalone options, counting towards the total credits required for a degree; ***Professional Development and Lifelong Learning***, when Micro-Credential programs, quantified in ECTS, are designed for professional development or lifelong learning.

Additionally, certain National good practices, aligned with the European Approach to Micro-Credentials, provide a useful framework of reference. In Ireland, the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has been in place since 2003 and has always provided for the inclusion of small qualifications. Traditionally, these were called non-major awards and could be as small as 5 ECTS. More recently, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), as the awarding body, has adopted a [formal procedure for the quality evaluation and validation of Micro-Credentials](#). QQI (2024) defines a Micro-Credential as a programme with a “*volume of between 5 and 30 ECTS, leading to a special purpose award at NQF 6 to 9*”, and in addition to having a very strict and independent evaluation procedure, also clearly states that there must be a “*clear and persuasive rationale for creation of a new standalone award for such a programme rather than as an embedded award created through the standard validation*”. Furthermore, as [regulated](#) by the Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland (NMBI), nurses and midwives can pursue Micro-Credentials only at post-registration level. These aspects are important, as they ensure that Micro-Credentials are of the highest quality, and that they do not substitute formal higher education, but rather act as an added value for learners who wish to acquire additional skills and competences which can be used as Recognised Prior Learning (RPL).

As highlighted by the EFN, if the principles listed by the European Commission (2021) and by the Council of the EU (2022), which were implemented in the Irish case study, were to be followed, these could allow Micro-Credentials to become an effective tool to facilitate the upskilling and reskilling of the health workforce at a time when innovation in areas like digitalisation and AI or the green transition of healthcare are deeply affecting the ways health and care are planned and delivered by the nursing profession.

Despite these positive aspects, several challenges remain in the realms of Micro-Credentials in the healthcare sector. First of all, the ongoing debates on Micro-Credentials follow a more general approach, without a specific focus for the healthcare sector, and more specifically for nursing education and its quality assurance requirements. For example, EU agencies like [Cedefop](#) are developing a large body of research on Micro-credentials¹ with focus on how Micro-credentials can benefit Vocational Education and Training (VET). While Micro-Credentials can be a useful supportive tool for VET, nursing education and qualifications requirement are set at a higher level, in line with the EU Directive [2005/36/EC](#), updated by [Directive 2013/55/EU](#) and the [updated Annex V](#). As such, the nursing profession is very different from other professional sectors, whereby the education levels must be of the highest level, and this should be reflected in the Micro-Credentials.

Taking these factors into account, the EFN recommends the EU Institutions and the EU and European Member States to:

1. Invest in high quality, accessible formal education programmes that provide ECTS for nurses. High quality formal education cannot be substituted, and it represents the most effective way to uphold high professional standards for the nursing profession and for the quality and safety of patients' care in the EU and Europe.
2. Develop a European Approach to Micro-Credentials for the healthcare sector, with a specific focus on nursing care. This must complement, and not substitute, the education and training requirements set for nurses in the Directive 2013/55/EU and the updated Annex V, and should be developed by taking into consideration the uniquely complex competency requirements which stem from the responsibilities of frontline registered nurses towards patients/citizens.
3. In line with the previous recommendation, Micro-Credentials targeted for nursing education should undergo extensive quality assurance. To ensure this, Micro-Credentials for registered nurses and allied healthcare professionals should be developed following the same-quality assurance requirements as higher-education educational material, and should be measured in ECTS in line with the [Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#).
4. To ensure that Micro-Credentials do not lead to fragmented learning in the context of up-skilling of registered nurses, and that they reflect their real frontline needs, they should be aligned in a systematic way with competency-based frameworks, particularly the 8 competencies of nurses listed in the Directive 2013/55/EU.²

¹ To be noted that the European Commission and the Council of the EU use the word "Micro-Credentials", while Cedefop uses the word "Microcredentials". The EFN follows the European Commission and Council of the EU wording.

² Mitchell, S., Hart, J., Gharaibeh, M. et al. Principles to award learning achievements for lifelong learning in health using micro-credentials: an international Delphi study. *Hum Resour Health* 23, 7 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-024-00969-y>

5. Develop a transparent EU framework for micro-credentials assessments in the context of nursing continuing education, which will support quality assurance and ensure that learners have acquired the expected learning outcomes, building on best international practices³.
6. Make extensive financial and human resource available, through new and/or existing funds such as the [Recovery and Resilience Facility \(RRF\)](#), in order for formal and non-formal, recognised education bodies, to develop Micro-Credentials of the highest quality which can satisfy the demand of frontline registered nurses for upskilling and reskilling at a time of fast scientific innovation, and of limited resources due to nursing shortages.
7. Make adequate funding available through new and/or existing funds such as the [Recovery and Resilience Facility \(RRF\)](#), [EU4Health](#), and [Erasmus+](#), to ensure that frontline nurses can undergo upskilling and reskilling during paid, work hours, so that it does not become another burden undermining work-life balance, thus undermining their mental well-being.

Further readings:

- Cedefop (2023). Microcredentials for labour market education and training: the added value for end users. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/141643>
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- Directive 2013/55/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013 amending Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications and Regulation (EU) No 1024/2012 on administrative cooperation through the Internal Market Information System ('the IMI Regulation') (2013) (Online). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013L0055>
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³ Abramovich, S. & Reed, A. (2024). *Whitepaper: Creating assessments for micro-credentials in higher education organizations*. University at Buffalo, 1–32.

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- Guide to completing QQI Programme – Validation Descriptor – Higher Education – Microcredentials (2024). Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2024-04/het-microcredentials-guidance-document-april-2024_0.pdf
- Joint-sectoral protocol between Designated Awarding Bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications – July 2022. Available at: [Joint-sectoral protocol DABs.pdf](#)
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