

Key Considerations:

4EU+ Position

on Micro-

Credentials

November 2022



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Introduction

The European population continually needs to update their knowledge, upgrade skills and enhance competences in order to keep pace with the demands of a rapidly changing labour market aiming to solve complex challenges of the 21st century and further scientific progress. In addition to offering up-to-date, high-quality degree programmes, 4EU+ Alliance Universities wish to contribute to European lifelong learning for students and highly skilled professionals through the development and delivery of micro-credentials. The Alliance will do so with a view to [the recommendations on micro-credentials issued and adopted by the European Council on 16 June 2022](#) to ensure standardization, recognisability and portability across the EU.

As active participants in shaping education policy in their respective countries, 4EU+ member institutions will actively engage in national talks in the Member States on policies and legislative frameworks surrounding the notion of micro-credentials and will take outcomes into account in future development and offers of Alliance micro-credentials.

Our approach to micro-credentials within the Alliance is guided by a few key considerations that are aligned with guidance provided by the EU Commission in its publications on the topic.

Consideration: A Standardized EU-Approach

4EU+ recognises the advantages in a joint European approach to micro-credentials. In addition to the reasons stated by the Commission for a joint approach, we consider a standardized approach as crucial in order to

- allow for collaboration across EU borders on developing short-term academic programs that meet the quality standards of our universities and provide transparency on what the participant has learned and
- allow for portability of the credential and ownership of individuals of their learning

Consideration: A Common Understanding

4EU+ agrees with the EU Commission stance that common language surrounding the concept of micro-credentials is needed and the areas which it

seeks to capture in its definition¹. Maintaining close proximity to the Commission's definition, 4EU+ has identified the following as our guiding principles:

- In the interest of providing short-term programming for professional, lifelong learning, 4EU+ is interested in keeping the volume and certification of learning as open as possible to give the Alliance room for various models and provision of flexible learning opportunities. To remain true to the notion of micro-credentials being short and of a small volume, Alliance will work with micro-credentials in the range between 1 and 15 ECTS in volume. However, recognizing that ECTS may not carry the same relevance outside of higher education and that national regulation may limit the awarding of additional ECTS beyond those required for completion of a degree program, it is within each institutions decision-making power to award or not award ECTS for completion of a micro-credential.
- A 4EU+ micro-credential is characterized by being trans-disciplinary and fostering practical, transferrable skills.
- Assessment of the learning outcomes in a 4EU+ context will ensure alignment between learning outcomes, activities and assessment formats and will be focused on demonstration that the learning outcome was met and/or specific competence acquired. In many instances, this will be achieved through project- or challenge-oriented assessment formats.
- For 4EU+, main target groups will be bachelor-, master- and doctoral students (from inside and outside 4EU+) and highly skilled professionals. This falls in line with the intended purpose of micro-credentials to build and increase skills and competences in the EU population in general, throughout life.
- The Alliance will be looking at digital initiatives that would ensure portability and authentication of micro-credentials awarded by the Alliance institutions. Until a digital solution is in place, 4EU+ will issue paper/PDF certificates and/or make use of other types of portfolios.

The Alliance will further explore stackability of micro-credentials into larger credentials and the possibility of offering learning pathways. Stacking models – whether and how stacking will be accommodated – will greatly depend on national legislation pertaining to degree programmes and/or lifelong learning of the awarding institution(s).

¹ Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, p. 14

Consideration: Design & Issuance of Micro Credentials

4EU+ takes the following position on the principles listed by the Commission to guide design and issuance of micro-credentials and systems for providers:

Quality: Quality assurance of micro-credentials in 4EU+ will follow the principles determined by the Alliance's quality management system 4EU+QUALITY which includes standards and guidelines of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. New evaluation formats especially for micro-credentials will be developed within 4EU+QUALITY: possible options are surveying participants and including feedback from external partners, e.g. associated partners, engaged in developing and delivering the courses or activities.

Transparency: In regard to credit load, the Alliance will use ECTS. Micro-credentials may be included in national qualification frameworks/systems, where relevant, and in line with national priorities and decisions.

Relevance: When designing micro-credentials, 4EU+ will have their topical relevance ensured through dialogues with e.g. our academic flagships, student bodies, associated partners, industry or labour market organisations with the overall goal of providing a way to upskill and reskill EU citizens. 4EU+ micro-credentials will respond to the needs and challenges of society and aim to be interdisciplinary and foster transversal and transferrable skills.

Valid assessment: The Alliance will ensure that the micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent standards and that the type of assessment used to attain the credential is clearly stated with reference to the learning activities and related learning outcomes.

Learning pathways: Micro-credentials may be used to provide flexible learning pathways for our students and professional learners. The Alliance may offer both standalone courses and, if possible, courses that can be stacked into a larger credential. Learners could profit from the Alliance having a principle of creating building blocks of equal sizes ECTS to make stacking into a larger credential easier. Issuance of a credential will be dependent on an assessment of the learning outcomes either through an examination or active participation.

Recognition: Micro-credentials are recognised for academic or employment purposes. 4EU+ uses the standard procedures in the individual institutions in recognising qualifications and learning outcomes, when dealing with micro-credentials issued by formal and non-formal education providers within and outside the Alliance.

Portability: 4EU+ recognises that micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner). The Alliance will explore possibilities of supporting that micro-credentials are stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. 4EU+ believes that the infrastructure for storing data should be based on open standards and data models to ensure

interoperability, seamless exchange of data, and allow for easy verification of data authenticity.

Learner-centredness: 4EU+ recognises the importance of micro-credentials being learner-centred and wishes to include learners – students and professionals – in both the development and the evaluation of the courses and activities.

Authentication: The Alliance will ensure that 4EU+ micro-credentials issued by institutions in the Alliance contain sufficient information to authenticate the identity of the credential-holder (learner), the legal identity of our institutions/4EU+, as well as the date and location of issuance of the micro-credential².

Information and guidance: The Alliance will ensure to provide information on our micro-credentials to learners through (online) course catalogues, relevant websites and academic advisors at our respective institutions as well as through the 4EU+ website or student portal.

Future Implementation of Micro Credentials within 4EU+

4EU+ partners already offer short courses and learning opportunities that fall within the established framework for micro-credentials. The two primary target groups for micro-credentials are students (bachelor/master/PhD) enrolled in degree programmes at 4EU+ institutions and professionals in need of reskilling and upskilling to maintain relevance and keep pace with the developments within the European workforce.

For students, micro-credentials can offer the opportunity to participate in courses and activities that can either be recognised as part of the degree or through which additional knowledge and competencies beyond the degree programme can be gained.

The Alliance currently offers the following activities that could fall under or be further developed to form sustainable micro-credentials:

- Joint student projects
- Summer schools
- Shared online courses
- Educational projects

Through joint educational activities, the Alliance works to foster five shared competencies in 4EU+ students: multilingualism, data literacy, critical thinking, entrepreneurship and social engagement. In addition to these skills,

² These elements are also included in the 11 “mandatory elements” proposed in the COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, pp. 15-16

joint activities can contribute to giving our students an international experience and to attaining intercultural perspectives, understanding and competencies.

For professionals, the Alliance is currently developing research-based pilot courses that offer unique perspectives to the learners by drawing on academic specialists and resources from several partners. The course formats include both physical and virtual elements making the courses more easily accessible from various European countries. The co-creation of lifelong learning courses brings academics from 4EU+ institutions together strengthening course offerings to the benefit of the learners. Also, by having learners from different countries, the alliance supports professional sectorial networking across the EU.

As part of iCORE, the Alliance will continue the development of standalone courses but also explore possibilities of offering courses that can be stacked to become a larger (micro-) credential.

4EU+ micro-credentials can be offered with physical in-class teaching, in blended and 100 % online formats depending on what best serves the intended learning outcomes, intended outreach and target audiences.

The courses will be offered (including assessment) by a specific lead-institution but courses must be co-created by a number of partners and presented under the 4EU+ name. The credential – certificate and ECTS – will be issued by the lead-institution. Courses can change lead-institution but should be sustainably offered, evaluated and further developed as long as the topics remain relevant over a number of years by the same or by alternating institutions in the Alliance.



Conclusion

4EU+ recognizes the opportunities as well as the challenges presented by the concept of a standardized approach to micro-credentials across Europe. We are confident that publishing our Alliance's position on micro-credentials will further advance discourse and debate, necessary steps to reaching a commonly accepted understanding. We also look forward to being part of developments around identifying technical platforms and systems to support this endeavour and look to our countries' policy makers to keep driving the development and providing the necessary support for implementation.