



Micro-credentials Guide

For: Micro-credentials Committee and boards of examiners

September 2023

Table of contents

Introduction	1
I. Definition of micro-credentials	2
II. UG strategic micro-credentials project and participation in national micro-credentials pilot for professionals	2
III. Micro-credentials Committee	3
IV. National frameworks micro-credentials pilot for professionals	4
1. Quality Framework	4
1.1 Determination of level	5
1.2 Learning outcomes	5
1.3 Assessment	6
1.4 Study load	7
2. Duration and validity of the micro-credential	7
3. Proof of obtaining a micro-credential	7
4. Peer review	8
V. Course manual	8
VI. Task distribution	8
VII. Exemptions	9
Questions	10
Appendix 1: National quality framework micro-credentials pilot for professionals	11
Appendix 2: Template micro-credentials course manual	13

Introduction

In recent years, complex societal challenges and rapid technological progress have led to a huge demand for flexible and doable education with acknowledged quality value. As laid down in the Strategic Plan 2021-2026 and in line with developments at European and national levels regarding learning-pathway-independent learning and Lifelong Development (LD), the University of Groningen's ambition is to be able to award micro-credentials (MC) to students and professionals in the future.

Micro-credentials are mini-qualifications that demonstrate skills, knowledge, or experience in a specific component of a degree programme or discipline. This flexible form of education allows higher education institutions to offer very targeted further training or retraining options that meet the same quality standards as accredited education, have an independent value, and are considerably smaller than a full degree programme. This means higher education institutions can increase their societal impact by responding to the training needs of a broad target group.

The purpose of these guidelines is to prepare the Micro-credentials Committee and the boards of examiners of the University of Groningen for the introduction of micro-credentials in the Dutch higher education system and to provide guidance for the tasks and issues which that entails. This means that, on the one hand, the Micro-credentials Committee has to safeguard the final level of the MC-certified curriculum developed by the UG and, on the other hand, the boards of examiners have to process requests for exemption based on micro-credentials obtained at the University of Groningen or elsewhere.

The guide consists of seven chapters, starting with a definition of the concept of micro-credentials. Subsequently, the University of Groningen strategic micro-credentials project and the national micro-credentials pilot for professionals, in which the University of Groningen is participating, are discussed. The role of the Micro-credentials Committee is then explained, followed by a summary of the national frameworks for micro-credentials, including a further explanation of the components of the national quality framework (Appendix 1). Appendix 2 contains a template for a course manual.

Chapter VI is about the division of micro-credentials-related tasks between the Micro-credentials Committee, the course coordination, and the Board of Examiners.

The last chapter contains information about how to handle requests for exemption based on a micro-credential obtained at the University of Groningen or elsewhere.



I. Definition of micro-credentials

The definition of a micro-credential as used by the European Commission is as follows: *‘A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.’¹*

II. UG strategic micro-credentials project and participation in national micro-credentials pilot for professionals

In order to realize the introduction of micro-credentials, the micro-credentials strategic project was launched at the University of Groningen in 2021. The project aligns with developments concerning micro-credentials, flexible education, and Lifelong Development at European and national levels. The University of Groningen is experimenting with the certification of small chunks of ‘accreditation-worthy’ education.

As part of the strategic project, the University of Groningen is also participating in the [micro-credentials pilot for professionals](#). Thirty-four higher education institutions (HEIs) are involved in the pilot, as are the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH), Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The national pilot responds to the growing demand from professionals to be able to continue learning and developing during their career. The possibility of mini-qualifications offers opportunities to meet the individual needs of professionals. Compared to the various types of mini-qualifications available on the private market, the micro-credentials developed by HEIs are in line with the quality standards of accredited education. With a joint quality framework for micro-credentials, to which the entire higher education sector in the Netherlands has expressed its commitment in the context of the pilot via the umbrella organizations VH and UNL, HEI MCs distinguish themselves from the rest of the market. The aim of the pilot is cross-institution collaboration in a system in which micro-credentials have a recognizable and distinguishable

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Shapiro Futures, H., Andersen, T., Nedergaard Larsen, A European approach to micro-credentials – Output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group : final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2,021 <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/30863>. (for a summary, see [this brochure](#))

value. This means that, in principle, institutions recognize and acknowledge the validated learning outcomes of micro-credentials already obtained and/or obtained elsewhere. Participation in the national pilot enables the University of Groningen to contribute to national policy development and preparations for a potential amendment to the Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), which is expected to include micro-credentials.

Due to legal restrictions, the national micro-credentials pilot is currently only aimed at professionals. The intention is to see at a later stage whether and how micro-credentials can also be issued to other target groups within the Netherlands.

III. Micro-credentials Committee

A national quality framework has been drawn up for the national micro-credentials pilot for professionals, which stipulates that the board of the institution appoints a body or several bodies that can guarantee the final level of micro-credential-certified education. On 18 July 2023, the Board of the University decided to set up the ‘Micro-credentials Committee’ for this purpose and to designate this committee as the body intended for this purpose. During the term of the internal pilot phase (until 2026), this committee is responsible for guaranteeing the final level of micro-credential-certified education. This committee is organized as follows:

- Two members of the faculty board of examiners (or faculty staff members with comparable expertise) are appointed to this committee from the faculties where micro-credentials are being developed. This concerns the boards of examiners for the degree programmes or faculty relevant to the micro-credential.
- One of the two members is the permanent representative in the Micro-credentials Committee and looks at all proposals for new micro-credentials at the University of Groningen. The second member only looks at the micro-credential(s) for their own faculty and only attends Committee meetings for this purpose.
- The Committee is supported by an educational advisor from ESI.
- The Committee is further supported by an administrative secretary.
- When new micro-credentials are applied for, the Committee will be informed of this by the micro-credentials project core team, and the applicant will provide the Committee with the necessary documents. A Committee meeting is then scheduled.
- At the end of the pilot phase, the Committee will formulate recommendations based on experience regarding the desired organization aimed at safeguarding final levels for micro-credentials.

This means that faculties can gain expertise together in the field of micro-credentials, it can



be guaranteed that they uniformly guarantee the final level of their micro-credentials, and, despite the central position of the Micro-credentials Committee, it can be ensured that the necessary substantive knowledge of the MC-related training is available within the central committee. Assigning the task of guaranteeing the final level of micro-credential-certified education to a separate committee prevents too much interdependence with the statutory tasks of the boards of examiners.

Based on the experience gained during the pilot phase and in view of the expected growth of education for professionals at the University of Groningen, in the scope of the final evaluation in 2026, it will be examined whether the composition and working method of the Micro-credentials Committee suffices and if it is advisable to continue in this form. Because developments in the field of LD are closely related to the micro-credentials project, one potential outcome could be that a central Board of Examiners or a similar body will be set up which can specifically guarantee the final level of education for professionals (whether or not certified with a micro-credential).

IV. National frameworks micro-credentials pilot for professionals

A national quality framework has been drawn up (see Appendix 1) with which all education for professionals certified with a micro-credential must comply. In the national pilot in which the University of Groningen is participating, micro-credentials are currently limited to education for professionals. This is because micro-credentials in the Netherlands cannot yet be issued to regular students within the meaning of the law due to legal restrictions on the costing system. Furthermore, the term ‘accreditation-worthy education’ is used because, from a legal point of view, accredited education only concerns diploma-oriented pathways and, therefore, not smaller chunks of education. This means that micro-credential-certified education is developed based on the same standards as accredited education. Participants in micro-credential-certified education pay the full cost price for it because education for professionals does not fall under government-funded education.

1. Quality framework

The agreement is that when developing a micro-credential, an institution will ensure that the teaching meets the standards for ‘accreditation-worthy’ education. This can be done, among other things, by using and following the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and the other Bologna tools, such as the ECTS Users’ Guide and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). If a micro-credential is issued by an accredited institution, it is assumed that the quality framework has been adhered to. This is

done on the basis of mutual trust, as is also the case with Minors offered at the university. At a later stage, micro-credentials could be included under accredited education in the context of institutional accreditation, but this is not yet the case.

1.1 Determination of level

Information about the prior knowledge needed by participants for micro-credential-certified education is used as an indicator to determine level. The indication of the level is linked to the EQF/NLQF level and is apparent from the formulation of the learning outcomes. In anticipation of the developments surrounding the NLQF (Dutch Qualification Framework) bill, it has been agreed nationally that institutions will provide an indication of the level based on the indicators of the various levels.

The EQF/NLQF format is as follows ([source](#)):

Formal qualification	NLQF	EQF
Associate degree	5	5
Bachelor	6	6
Master	7	7
PhD	8	8

Here is an overview of the different diploma levels in [the Netherlands](#) and [Europe](#).

The micro-credential must match the intended EQF/NLQF level. A micro-credential at NLQF level 7 is a Master's level module, for example. Participants are expected to have completed a Bachelor's degree or equivalent as entry level.

1.2 Learning outcomes

Micro-credentials work with learning outcomes independent of learning pathways. In the context of the national pilot, these are applied to the target group of professionals. In connection with the independent value of a micro-credential, the learning outcomes function, as it were, as attainment outcomes at the micro level and are assessed individually. This applies to both newly developed courses (= > relationship with teaching/research portfolio of the relevant faculty/institution) and existing accredited education certified with a micro-credential. In the latter case, it is possible that the initial students and professionals may jointly participate in the same educational activity. For the initial students, this is part of the programme for which



they have registered, pay tuition fees, and for which they receive a diploma upon successful completion. For professionals, this is a course unit with an independent value for which they pay the full cost price and receive a micro-credential. If necessary, the assessment formats can be adapted to the needs of the target group of professionals and may therefore differ from the assessment formats for the initial students. This also means that the Teaching and Examination Regulations of the course do not apply to the participating professionals.

Therefore, a micro-credential is never part of an accredited programme, but the teaching of an accredited programme may be offered to professionals and certified with a micro-credential, provided that the national quality framework is met.

The coordinator of the micro-credential gives an indication of the EQF/NLQF level. The Micro-credentials Committee then checks whether they agree with this by looking at the formulation of the learning outcomes and the structure of the micro-credential as a whole. Broadly speaking, it can be said that drawing up learning outcomes at [higher cognitive levels](#) for micro-credentials is consistent with EQF/NLQF level 7 and for lower cognitive levels is consistent with EQF/NLQF level 6. Obviously, there are exceptions to this, and the Micro-credentials Committee will have to look at the micro-credential module as a whole. The main difference with regular modules in a Bachelor's or Master's degree programme is the learning-pathway-independent character of the micro-credential. Therefore, the Micro-credentials Committee must carefully examine whether all learning objectives within the micro-credential can reasonably be achieved and whether any entry requirements are sufficient.

1.3 Assessment

The learning outcomes and assessment must align constructively. Within the micro-credential, the focus during testing is not only on whether or not the learning outcomes have been achieved (summative testing or assessment *for* learning) but also on the student's learning process (formative testing or assessment *of* learning). The primary purpose of formative assessment is to gain insight into the student's progress on the learning objectives during the learning process (while following MC-certified education) so that the lecturer and/or participant can make adjustments where necessary. Given the isolated nature of the MC-certified teaching activities, insight into progress is even more important. Therefore, it is important for the Micro-credentials Committee to take a good look at the proposed plan for the entirety of formative and summative assessment of the micro-credential in accordance with the format (still being developed) in the template of the course manual (see Appendix 2) so that the quality of assessment and achieving the learning objectives is guaranteed. In doing so, it will not only pay attention to the summative assessment but also to the planned formative assessment (together the continuous assessment). On the one hand, attention is paid to whether assessment fosters

the participant's learning process but, on the other hand, also whether participants are not overwhelmed by too many assessments.

1.4 Study load

As laid down in the quality framework, the study load is indicated in study load hours if the teaching certified with a micro-credential is not derived from an accredited degree programme. However, it must be related to the faculty's teaching and/or research portfolio. If the teaching is derived from an accredited programme (for example, in the context of non-examination students), then ECTS can also be *indicated* (based on the number of study hours followed). N.B.: this means that no ECTS are *awarded*. As part of the national pilot, it has been agreed that micro-credentials will be developed in the range of three to a maximum of 30 ECTS (or equivalent in hours). For this, one ECTS is equivalent to 28 study hours.

2. Duration and validity of the micro-credential

A micro-credential does not expire: a participant has demonstrated at some point that certain learning outcomes have been acquired. Just like a regular diploma, a micro-credential remains valid for a lifetime. At the same time, the usefulness of the micro-credential in the context of further study and work may be time-limited. At the time that someone wishes to use a micro-credential, for example for continuation of a study in a diploma-oriented track, the responsible Board of Examiners may decide that the micro-credential is so outdated (for example, because the content of the field has experienced huge development) that the micro-credential cannot be used in this diploma-oriented track. The same applies to the use of a micro-credential in the field: whether the status of someone's knowledge is sufficient is at the employer's discretion.

3. Proof of obtaining a micro-credential

Obtained micro-credentials are recorded in a national register. Initially, the [SURF Edubadges platform](#) will be used and later, registration via DUO may follow. A *digital badge* is awarded via the SURF Edubadges platform. This form of certification currently has no legal status. During the course of the pilot, it will be worked out which data should be mentioned in the *digital badge*. We call this data *metadata*. Currently, these are:

- Name of participant
- Name of institution/organizational unit that issues the micro-credential
- Name of course unit
- Acquired learning outcomes
- Indication level based on European Qualifications Framework (EQF)/Dutch Qualifications Framework (NLQF)
- Indication of the scope based on ECTS/study load



- Requirements to qualify for the micro-credential/Edubadge
- The agreements laid down in the quality framework of the pilot with which the certificate complies in Dutch and English

4. Peer review

There is no fixed process yet for external quality assurance of micro-credentials. Peer reviews are currently being used between institutions. Mutual control is taking place, and this lays a foundation for trust in each other's micro-credentials. The participating higher education institutions set up the organization and internal quality assurance for their micro-credentials based on the agreements in the quality framework of the pilot and the European ESG guidelines. In addition, they describe their range of micro-credentials based on mutual agreements. The peer review provides the institution with external feedback on the internal quality assurance system and the description(s) drawn up by them. Learning from and with each other is central to the peer reviews.

This means internal quality assurance systems, mutual recognition, and the quality of micro-credentials issued are promoted.

V. Course manual

Regulations applicable to participants admitted to the micro-credential are included in a course manual. This concerns matters such as admission, an overview of the teaching, and a schedule for the assessment. A template for this can be found in Appendix 2.

VI. Task distribution

The establishment of the Micro-credentials Committee meets the condition of the national micro-credential quality framework for professionals to designate a body that guarantees the final level of MC-certified education. The other tasks that are related to MC-certified education fall under the course coordination/senior lecturer and/or a body designated by the faculty.

In order to enshrine micro-credentials in law in the future, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science intends to use the results of the national micro-credentials pilot for professionals to explore the needs and issues that exist. This means that there is currently no legal duty for boards of examiners with regard to micro-credentials.

However, it is expected that boards of examiners will increasingly encounter requests for exemption based on micro-credentials obtained at the University of Groningen or elsewhere.

The following division of tasks is therefore used in the context of the pilot phase:



Micro-credentials Committee	Guaranteeing final level: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Matching learning outcomes with the intended (cognitive) EQF/NLQF level- Matching learning outcomes with assessments- The MC-certified educational activity can be completed as a stand-alone unit (= not building on the knowledge and skills of previous courses in a curriculum) based on the entry requirements.
Course coordination/senior lecturer and/or a body designated by the faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Safeguarding the quality of assessments- Evaluating and determining the result of assessments- Establishing guidelines in the course manual- Taking measures in the event of cheating, e.g. invalidating the participant's activities in the MC-certified education/assessment and excluding the participant from participation in MC-certified education at the institution for a maximum of one year- Handling complaints- Inclusion of MC-certified educational activities in the regular quality assurance cycle and the faculty education monitor
Board of Examiners	Granting an exemption based on the learning outcomes of a micro-credential obtained at the University of Groningen or elsewhere

VII. Exemptions

With a micro-credential, a participant can demonstrate that the required prior knowledge is present, for example when entering a programme or another micro-credential. The learning outcomes obtained through a micro-credential, which overlap with all or some of the learning outcomes of an accredited programme, may also lead to an exemption upon enrolment in that programme. In principle, institutions recognize the validated learning outcomes of micro-credentials already obtained and/or obtained elsewhere.

If the Board of Examiners is presented with a micro-credential in the context of an exemption request, the following points are important:

- Since it concerns learning outcomes independent of learning processes, evaluation of the form of the assessment is not the main issue. Criteria for the comparison to be recognized are, therefore:
 - Study load expressed in hours/ECTS (equivalent)



- Level comparable to EQF/NLQF (not below level 5)
- Clear insight into the content and description of the learning outcomes
- A clear description of organizational forms, i.e. not strictly comparing the type of assignment, supervision, or assessment, but how the participant indicates how the learning outcome has been demonstrated.
- Micro-credentials do not automatically lead to an exemption in a related course. It is up to the Board of Examiners of the course in question to determine whether the micro-credential in question leads to an exemption.
- An application for an exemption will only be denied on the basis of its content (--> learning outcomes) and not based on the type of education/learning format, i.e. the fact that it is a micro-credential. The learning outcomes determine the scope and the result and serve as a yardstick.
- As a Board of Examiners, it is not necessary to assign the level but to trust that the issuing institution has used the level indicators.

Questions

If you have any questions, please contact the teaching division of General & Legal Affairs (AJZ) (onderwijs.abjz@rug.nl) and the quality assurance division of the Strategy Department Education and Students (SES) (accreditaties@rug.nl).

Appendix 1: National quality framework micro-credentials pilot for professionals

Minimum internal quality assurance of micro-credentials

1. The quality of the teaching certified with micro-credentials is guaranteed based on the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#)
2. The Board of the University is familiar with and intentionally opts for the range of micro-credentials based on the institution's LD vision
3. The institution has set up an internal quality assurance process for designing, acknowledging, and safeguarding the quality of the micro-credentials
4. The institution has designated a body or several bodies that can guarantee the final level of micro-credential-certified education
5. A form of course evaluation, participation, and the possibility to submit complaints has been set up for participants of MC-certified courses

Conditions for participating institutions in education

6. The guideline for micro-credentials is that they are course units with no less than three ECTS and no more than 30 ECTS
7. The teaching that is certified with a micro-credential is substantively related to the institution's teaching and/or research portfolio. This can be both existing and newly developed teaching
8. It is clear who the intended target group of the teaching is, if necessary, what the required prior knowledge of the participants is, what the possible admission requirements are, and how these are assessed
9. The teaching programme, the educational learning environment, and the quality of the teaching team make it possible for the incoming participants to realize the intended learning outcomes
10. An understanding of the learning outcomes, level of education, and scope of the micro-credential are provided. The participating institutions describe this unambiguously and in line with European agreements (Bologna) and developments in Brussels

Below, you will find the supplement to the quality framework on this point

11. In principle, institutions recognize the validated learning outcomes of micro-credentials already obtained and/or obtained elsewhere. Whether this may lead to intake and/or exemption will continue to fall under the mandate of the Board of Examiners or another body designated for this purpose by the institution²
12. The assessments support the learning process of the participant, and evaluation is valid, reliable, transparent for participants, and sufficiently independent

² This national quality framework erroneously states that granting exemptions falls under the mandate of the Board of Examiners. However, the power of boards of examiners to grant exemptions stems directly from the WHW, so there is no question of a mandate.



The established supplement to the quality framework for describing the content of micro-credentials

To describe the content of micro-credentials we adopt the European framework, which is based on learning outcomes formulated independently of learning pathways. The method for formulating learning outcomes is up to the institution.

In the context of the European Bologna agreements, learning outcomes are defined as follows: ([Competences in Education and Recognition Project \(CoRe\), 2010, p.21-22](#))

A learning outcome is a measurable result of a learning experience which allows us to ascertain to which extent/level/standard a competence had been formed or enhanced. Learning outcomes are not properties unique to each student but statements which allow higher education institutions to measure whether students have developed their competences to the required level.

Learning outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after successful completion of a process of learning. They are statements of concrete and verifiable signs that witness/certify how the planned competences, including the required levels of knowledge, are being developed or acquired.

Quality framework with regard to describing the level of micro-credentials

The level of micro-credentials is described in two ways:

- Through well-formulated learning outcomes that give the reader an idea of the level of the micro-credential.
- In addition, institutions use the EQF/NLQF indicators to indicate the level of the micro-credential. The institution must be able to justify this.

Quality framework with regard to describing the scope of micro-credentials

Describing the study load based on credits or study load hours is widely applicable for both accredited and accreditation-worthy³ courses. This promotes interchangeability and is preferable for micro-credentials.

Linking credits to the European standards for study load is relevant for participants and employers so that they can estimate the possible time investment. This grading can be based on the average participant without additional prior knowledge.

³ We use accreditation-worthy courses as a working term to indicate that under the quality framework of the pilot the course meets the European ESG standards for quality assurance but still falls outside existing external quality assurance instruments.



Appendix 2: Template micro-credentials course manual

Micro-credential Manual

University of Groningen
 Faculty ...
 Date



Scope of application

This manual applies to the teaching and assessments associated with the micro-credential....., and to all participants in this micro-credential.

Content of micro-credential

- Description of micro-credential and study load hours
- Objective of micro-credential
- Learning outcomes of micro-credential

Admission to the micro-credential

- Description of admission requirements: for example, certain level of previous education or language requirements.
- Who assesses admissibility?

Overview of the composition of the teaching programme

- Description of the teaching programme

Assessment overview

- Description of assessment

Assessment

- Assessment criteria
- Assessment method: in the form of a grade or pass/fail assessment?
- Obtaining badge and/or certificate

Disability

Participants with a disability are given the opportunity to follow and complete the course and assessment in a manner that is adapted as far as possible to their individual situation.

Cheating

Cheating is the act or omission by a participant that makes it wholly or partly impossible to correctly assess their own or others' knowledge, insight, and skills. Cheating also includes plagiarism, which means copying own work or someone else's work without correctly referring to the source.

If a participant cheats, the course coordination can declare the activities of the participant in the course or assessment invalid and exclude the participant for a maximum of one year from further participation in micro-credential-certified courses at the University of Groningen.

Complaints

If you have any complaints during or after the course, you can submit a written complaint to.... The complaint must be submitted within a reasonable time and must be accurately described.

Publication and changes

The course coordination ensures appropriate publication of this manual, as well as any amendments to it. An amendment to the manual does not affect current courses and/or assessments unless the interests of participants are not reasonably affected by this.



Miscellaneous

In cases not covered by this manual, the course coordination decides insofar as possible in line with this manual.