

Micro-credentials: An important part of a bigger ecosystem

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Micro-credentials are by no means new, with many, such as short-term courses, having been offered by different providers for years. Most have centred around outreach and continuing professional development (CPD) for the training of skilled workers and professionals.

Compared to macro-credentials, such as full degree or qualification programmes, micro-credentials can be a tool to downsize and shorten longer learning programmes for greater agility, flexibility and diversity.

UNESCO published a report, **Towards a Common Definition of Micro-Credentials**, earlier this year and is preparing another, **Short Courses, Micro-Credentials, and Flexible Learning Pathways: A blueprint for policy development and actions**.

Both provide a basis for further discussion of various facets of micro-credentials, from academic recognition and quality assurance (qualifications frameworks) to mobility, three interconnected pillars of UNESCO's portfolio on higher education in the Asia-Pacific region.

Academic recognition

One of the most critical issues related to micro-credentials is their recognition for further study or employment by government authorities, higher education institutions and employers. Without recognition they cannot be integrated into national and international learning ecosystems.

UNESCO's conventions on academic recognition, including the Tokyo Convention, officially known as the **Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education**, mainly focus on the recognition of qualifications which give people access to higher education, for example, school leaving diplomas and certificates, and recognition of higher education qualifications, including those held by refugees and displaced persons.

They also cover recognition of partial studies and prior learning, as well as qualifications acquired through non-traditional modes.

In line with the articles and provisions mentioned in these conventions, it is natural and justifiable to extend the recognition portfolio into small learning units like micro-credentials because they constitute prior learning or partial learning, formal, non-formal or informal learning.

The joint statement on COVID-19 issued by parties to the Tokyo Convention in October 2020 calls for strengthening recognition of qualifications obtained via non-traditional modes, including online and blended learning. Furthermore, micro-credentials were confirmed as one of the committee priorities during the Third Session of the Tokyo Convention Committee held online in October 2021.

The National Information Centres (NICs) on academic recognition in parties to the Tokyo Convention can, for instance, expand their provision to cover the recognised or accredited micro-credential programmes on their national portal and the portal of Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (**APNNIC**).

Other countries are being encouraged to set up a national quality register for the purpose of academic recognition of micro-credential programmes between countries in the region and beyond.

UNESCO is collecting examples of how micro-credential programmes have been recognised across the region, including from relevant government authorities, higher education institutions and industry, both by providers and consumers.

Quality assurance of micro-credentials

In the past, short-term courses and other small learning programmes were less regulated in terms of quality assurance and were not part of national and international learning ecosystems. This has to change.

Quality assurance is about course content, pedagogy and modalities of delivery, as well as the requirements for accrediting course providers and should apply to both macro- and micro-credential programmes. The concept of 'fit for purpose' also needs to be addressed for micro-credentials.

The former can be addressed by developing and implementing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) as tools to define and achieve learning outcomes. Integrating micro-credentials into the NQFs means their integration into the national learning ecosystem. This can prevent learning fragmentation.

The alignment of micro-credential programmes with the NQFs and relevant national subject-specific quality standards could be mandatory or voluntary, with accredited programmes getting onto national quality registers for public information and transparency.

Eventually, faculty members, frontline teachers and trainers should be able to design and implement their micro-credential programmes based on learning objectives and outcomes, pedagogical considerations, delivery modalities, learning assessment and learning resources.

They should also be able to ensure that their micro-credential programmes are aligned with upstream frameworks such as NQFs and national subject-specific quality standards.

Accrediting micro-credential programme providers can also add tremendous value to the quality enhancement of the programmes. Accreditation criteria should include physical and academic infrastructure, the quality of teaching personnel and internal quality regulations to ensure the quality delivery of micro-credential programmes.

The accreditation system can enable non-traditional providers, such as professional bodies and enterprises and NGOs, to join forces with higher education institutions to offer micro-credential programmes.

Impact on student mobility

The issue of student mobility has not received much focus in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). However, SDG target 4b is explicitly about mobility and calls for more scholarships for students from developing countries.

Scholarship providers, both public and private, in the region are fairly diverse, with support for mobility ranging from full and partial degree programmes, split-site joint learning programmes and various short-term exchange programmes and courses.

The Asia-Pacific region has some of the largest sending and receiving countries where student mobility is concerned (for example, Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, etc). Inter- and intra-regional student mobility is also expanding with a significant proportion of it focused on short-term exchange courses and programmes.

The Collective Action for Mobility Program of University Students in Asia (CAMPUS Asia), initiated by the governments of China, Japan and South Korea, is a useful example of international mobility programmes. Many of its activities are short-term student exchange programmes supported by credit transfer and accumulation systems among partner institutions from the three East Asian countries.

Similar mobility programmes have also been in operation in the region, such as the Asian International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Programme run by the SEAMEO Regional Centre specialising in higher education and development (SEAMEO-RIHED), the ASEAN Experiential Learning Programmes (AELP) offered by the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the EU-SHARE Scholarship programme for short-term (one semester) intra ASEAN and ASEAN-EU mobility.

The implementation and recognition of micro-credentials will facilitate short-term student mobility in the region and beyond, whether in person or virtually.

By linking short-term exchange programmes with the concept of micro-credentials, we hope that micro-credential-based mobility programmes can lead to the establishment of common subject-specific quality standards among partner institutions and eventually to the development of a common qualifications framework for countries in the region.

Benefits of micro-credentials

It is clear that small learning units have long been part of higher education provision. What is new with micro-credentials is the idea that they should be integrated into learning ecosystems to ensure quality delivery and recognition and avoid learning fragmentation.

With this in mind, we can identify their potential benefits.

First, micro-credential programmes are more accessible and affordable for learners, especially those who would otherwise not have the opportunity to study for macro-credentials at conventional higher education institutions.

Secondly, they can help make higher education provision more efficient and relevant, especially when it comes to employment-oriented and market-driven learning programmes. Small can mean agile, responsive and relevant.

Higher education providers can split their degree and qualification programmes into stand-alone components or modules with mechanisms for stakeholder engagement to enhance relevance and alignment of micro-credential programmes with their respective NQFs and subject-specific quality standards.

Thirdly, micro-credentials make personalised and flexible learning possible. Learners can pick their micro-credential programmes from different providers, learn at their own pace, accumulate their learning at credit banks and eventually claim their CPD credits and full qualifications.

Fourth, they pave the way for non-traditional higher education providers, especially those on the demand side, such as enterprises and professional bodies, to develop small learning programmes as part of a national learning ecosystem and contribute to the increasing relevance of learning programmes.

We need to look at higher education from a holistic perspective and recognise that both micro- and macro-credentials are part of the learning ecosystem. We should not therefore go to the other extreme of promoting a 'fast food' type approach and lose our patience with macro-credentials, such as degree programmes.

Using micro-credentials, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach can give way to 'fit-for-purpose' solutions. In the long term, higher education needs to broaden its ambitions and offerings in order to contribute to the holistic development of learners and the peaceful and sustainable development of communities and societies.

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