

Laura Rumbley: Welcome to the E-A-I-E podcast! My name is Laura Rumbley, and I'm the E-A-I-E's Director for Knowledge Development and Research. We are delighted you're tuning in!

In this, our 114th episode, we're pointing back to episode #18 in our series. That recording was published in May of 2021 and featured a conversation with Maria Kelo on "the big new world of micro-credentials".

Fast forward 5 years, and Maria has since moved on from her previous role as Director of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, or ENQA, to her current position as Director of the Institutional Development Unit at the European University Association. But, she's still keeping her finger on the pulse of micro-credentials. And thankfully so, because she brings an incredibly clear and insightful set of perspectives to an updated discussion of these diminutive learning units, which are attracting increasing interest and attention.

So, what does the world of micro-credentials look like in 2026 as compared to 2021? How is the current policy environment shaping the conversation around micro-credentials? Is there a tension between longstanding qualifications frameworks and how we should be thinking about quality assurance with respect to micro-credentials? And what does all of this mean to the world of international education?

Thanks for joining us as we explore these questions in this touch-base with Maria Kelo on the evolving world micro-credentials.

Laura Rumbley:

Maria, could you start by stating your name and title?

Maria Kelo:

I'm Maria Kelo, Director of the Institutional Development Unit at the European University Association.

Laura Rumbley:

Thank you so much for joining us again — this may be one of our first true "revisit" episodes. For listeners who may not be fully familiar with the term, could you give us your definition of micro-credentials?

Maria Kelo:

In the European context, a micro-credential is a record of learning outcomes following a small volume of learning — essentially a badge or certificate earned at the end of a learning experience. Although people often use the term to refer to the learning itself, technically it's the certification of outcomes.

A micro-credential should be a self-standing unit of learning with clearly defined outcomes. It's meant to help learners acquire targeted competencies for the labour market or personal development. Micro-credentials have been closely linked to lifelong learning rather than degree-seeking education.

One unresolved issue is how "small" the learning volume should be. In Europe, diversity is the norm, so micro-credentials can range from 1 ECTS to as many as 59 — almost a full year of study. So the size varies widely.

Laura Rumbley:

That's a great foundation. You joined us in 2021 for an episode that remains one of our

best-performing ever. Five years feels like a lifetime in this field. What developments stand out to you since then?

Maria Kelo:

It really does feel like a lifetime ago — the world was different, we were in COVID, everything was online. Today, no one raises an eyebrow at the term micro-credential. It has become a key concept in European higher education and policy. Everyone talks about them, even if definitions still vary.

There's now strong recognition of the value of smaller, certified learning units. Small units of learning have always existed, but now we have a common framework for offering them. They've spread across lifelong learning programmes and even into degree-related education.

The EUA's 2024 Trends Report found that micro-credentials are widely seen as a major opportunity. Three-quarters of institutions view them as a way to innovate, diversify, and expand their educational offer — even to attract international students by offering a “taster” of what they provide. Around 70% offer some form of non-degree education, even if they don't call it micro-credentials.

What hasn't grown as much is support for institutions implementing them. Universities still face practical challenges: missing frameworks, unclear procedures, funding questions, recognition issues, regulatory constraints, and how to ensure quality without overburdening institutions. Micro-credentials need to be agile, so heavy processes don't work.

One area with little progress is stackability — combining micro-credentials into a full degree. There's a lot of talk, but little clarity on how or whether it should happen. I'm not convinced learners would choose to build an entire degree this way. And focusing too much on stackability may actually slow progress.

Another ongoing challenge is how to handle alternative providers — companies, public authorities, charities. If micro-credentials are for personal or professional development, it's less of an issue. But if credits are involved, universities need assurance of quality.

Laura Rumbley:

That connects to a recent University World News piece describing micro-credentials as “shapeshifters.” The author warns that integrating them into existing qualification frameworks might “over-frame” the innovation they're meant to unlock. Is that a concern? And what kind of innovation should micro-credentials enable, especially in international education?

Maria Kelo:

I share that concern. We need clarity — on credits, learning outcomes, quality assurance — and our existing frameworks can accommodate micro-credentials. But there's a risk of over-framing. At one point, some suggested external accreditation for every micro-credential, which would be unworkable. By the time accreditation finished, the content might already be outdated.

Micro-credentials must respond quickly to emerging needs. We've moved past the idea of accrediting each one individually, and we trust institutions to ensure quality. But if credits are attached, we need consistency — we can't have “first-class” and “second-class” credits.

Innovation requires freedom. Simply chopping a degree into small pieces isn't innovation — it's old wine in new bottles.

One exciting area is cooperation with alternative providers. Micro-credentials allow universities to work with companies, local authorities, NGOs. This opens universities to society — both in terms of learners and programme design. Universities can learn from industry partners, and that innovation can influence full degree programmes.

Internationally, micro-credentials offer tremendous potential. Students can take part of their learning from institutions anywhere in the world, gaining exposure to high-quality education and global expertise. This could dramatically expand access to international experiences. Physical mobility targets like 20% are hard to reach, but virtual micro-credentials could reach 100%.

Imagine if all European students were expected to take a few credits via micro-credentials from foreign institutions — it would be incredibly exciting.

For providers, micro-credentials offer a lower-risk way to experiment with international cooperation. Setting up joint degrees is complex and slow; micro-credentials can be a testing ground that may eventually lead to deeper collaboration.

Laura Rumbley:

Let's talk about policy. How is the current policy environment shaping the conversation around micro-credentials?

Maria Kelo:

EU policies on skills have definitely boosted micro-credential uptake. It's now almost expected that countries have frameworks and institutions offer micro-credentials. They're seen as part of the "third mission" — societal outreach — and as a sign of innovation.

But institutions must ensure micro-credentials make sense within their own strategy and mission. Designing a good micro-credential is not easy. It's not about chopping up existing programmes; it's about creating targeted learning experiences.

The skills agenda has put micro-credentials on everyone's radar, but institutions must still design them thoughtfully.

Laura Rumbley:

If we meet again in five years, what would you hope has been accomplished?

Maria Kelo:

I'd hope for much more clarity — about the purposes and uses of micro-credentials, their labour-market value, and whether they truly support reskilling and upskilling. Micro-credentials are under pressure to solve many challenges, but we don't yet know if they're achieving that.

There won't be a single purpose. Some will be used within higher education, some for personal interest, some for labour-market needs. We need to understand these differences.

I also hope we'll have clearer ways of recognising micro-credentials from non-higher-education providers. And perhaps we'll distinguish between academic and applied micro-credentials.

The term "micro-credential" isn't protected — anyone can use it. So we need to provide enough information for learners to make informed choices.

Finally, I hope we don't force micro-credentials into old frameworks so tightly that they lose their innovative potential. Degrees already exist; micro-credentials should serve different needs.

Laura Rumbley:

Maria, you always bring such clarity to this topic. Thank you for joining us again — it's been wonderful speaking with you.

Maria Kelo:

Thank you, Laura.

Laura Rumbley: That was Maria Kelo, Director of the Institutional Development Unit at the European University Association. For more information about the evolving world of micro-credentials, we invite you to visit the links we've provided with this episode's session notes.

Micro-credentials are all about skill-building, so this offers a nice opportunity to remind you that it's always a good time to level up your expertise with the E-A-I-E Academy, where international educators go to grow!

Dive into hands-on training, learn from expert trainers and walk away with tools you can use the very next day. Whether you're new to the field or a seasoned leader, E-A-I-E Academy training offerings give you the confidence and clarity to make a real impact.

With various courses now open for registration, all that's left is to find the right one that suits your needs! Visit the Training page in the Career Centre section of our website and start (or boost) your professional development journey today.

With that, we bring this E-A-I-E podcast episode to a close. We appreciate you joining us and thank you in advance if you're willing to share your enthusiasm for our series with your friends and colleagues. Our next episode will be available in just one month's time. For now, all good wishes to you from the E-A-I-E!