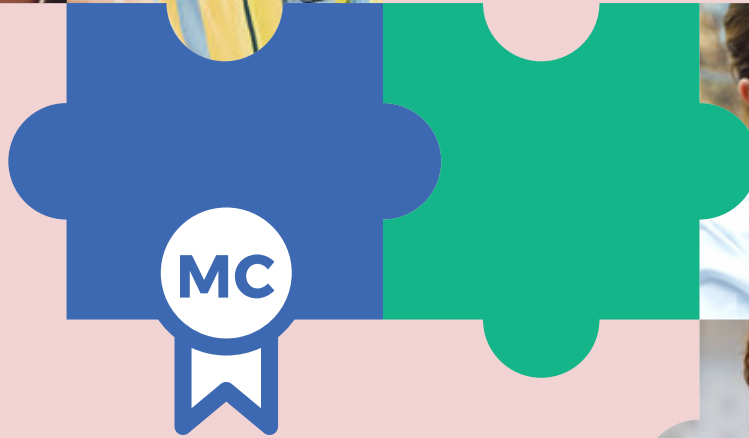


Npuls
February 2024



micro-credentials
for lifelong learning
in the Netherlands

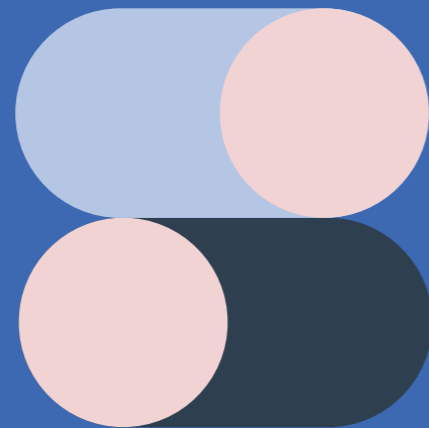


**Moving
education.**



Editorial
by Elsbeth Vonkeman, Npuls
liaison on behalf of the Netherlands
Association of Universities of Applied
Sciences (Vereniging Hogescholen, VH)

When small steps suddenly add up



Just think of the opportunities we could create if, as professionals, we could offer chunks of training in separate modules. Then imagine if we could give participants who have taken such a module a certificate that is the same across all institutions. And that you could put this in a kind of register, as we do for diplomas... That would really make training for professionals a lot more flexible! What would that require and can we actually do it?

It was with these questions in mind that we launched the micro-credentials pilot in the Netherlands as part of the Acceleration Plan in the summer of 2021. Legislation focuses on diploma-based programmes, but the world is changing and there are more and more participants in our education system who can't or don't necessarily want to follow a full training programme.

We set up a pilot based on a quality framework that clearly and succinctly specifies the following: this is what we mean by a micro-credential, this is how we ensure quality and this is what we have agreed about the descriptions on the certificate (and thus on the edubadge).

And then we thought: what if fifteen of the Dutch universities of applied sciences and research universities might be interested in participating in a pilot project to develop something like this?

As many as thirty-four institutions were interested in taking part!

Learning communities were soon formed in which all these institutions began to work together. And it wasn't just thirty-four people in these communities; many more joined up. Knowledge was matched to knowledge, questions and answers were exchanged, examples and experiences were shared and the first certificates and badges were awarded. A slow but steady process of change was initiated in the institutions and the transformation towards a more flexible way of organising education started to become visible.

This is precisely why, at Npuls, we are forging ahead with this endeavour across vocational training schools as well as universities of applied sciences and research universities. At Npuls, we are helping to boost this transformation. We are working on embedding micro-credentials for learners – primarily for professionals but also for first-time students where possible – into the education system. For, to be responsive to learners' needs and to developments in society and the labour market, education must become more flexible while maintaining high quality standards.



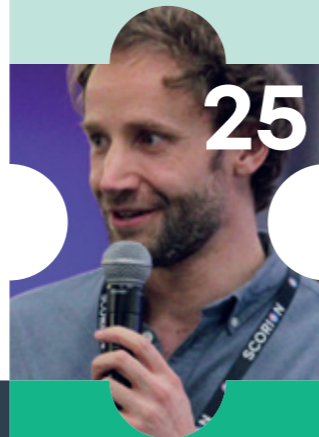
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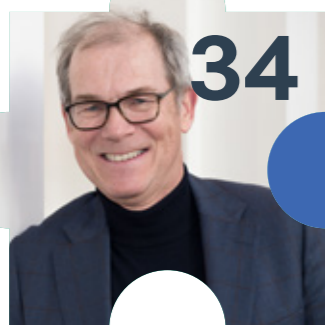
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Disclaimer: The original content of this magazine was created in Dutch, so please consider the Dutch education context when reading the magazine.



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Micro-credentials: learning does not stop after your diploma

From left to right
Ulrike Wild,
Bram van der Kruk,
Ashwin Brouwer

Vocational training schools, universities of applied sciences and research universities are negotiating a set of agreements on compact modules – micro-credentials – for people who want to continue learning. Learning does not stop once you have gained an entry-level qualification. There is high demand from society and the labour market for lifelong learning (LLL), and that demand will continue to grow. Public institutions are working on a joint concept in which education is offered in a different way so that it is interchangeable and complementary. We are reaping the benefits of this approach, and it is here to stay.

The page has been turned and a new chapter begins. Micro-credentials will have a proper place in the education system in the Netherlands, even though this still requires a significant cultural and systemic change. With a micro-credential, public educational institutions can offer learners modules that are smaller than a diploma-based programme, assess the learning outcomes and recognise them. What we seek to achieve is unanimity in the description of what is on offer, in quality assurance and in how the units relate to each other. The aim is to make much more possible for the learner, for the institutions and for the labour market.

Micro-credentials fit into the wider picture of constant changes in society and in the labour market. Together, we must be in a position to respond to changing demands from, for example, sectors with a shortage of skilled workers or from professionals themselves. But institutions, too, see opportunities to make their knowledge more accessible. This is not just happening in the Netherlands but across many other EU member states. Micro-credentials do not replace existing structures, such as bachelor's and master's programmes; they are an extension of them. Micro-credentials are the equivalent of coins in our monetary system, which we are introducing now – having already introduced the larger units, banknotes.

What sets us apart in the Netherlands in this respect is the considerable autonomy of educational institutions and sectors. By joining forces as secondary vocational, higher professional and academic education sectors, we can forge ahead and play into the European trend. This collaboration also strengthens our position in relation to other, commercial, education providers.

Intersectoral collaboration is not far away

As with all major changes, there are early adopters. We also see a difference in pace between people in education who recognise opportunities for other target groups and those responsible for organisational processes that require substantial adjustments. There is a lot of enthusiasm and it is spreading to more and more places.

But we still have major steps to take together. In 2023, a two-year pilot at universities of applied sciences and research universities was completed successfully. This demonstrates the potential of micro-credentials. In higher education, 34 institutions got involved in this project, which means that the majority are already on board. And more are signing up. Some 1,500 unique micro-credentials have now been issued in this pilot. In early 2024, vocational training schools will also start a pilot.

Micro-credentials meet the demand for taking modules that are smaller than a diploma-based programme and certifying these modules. Together, we make cross-sector agreements on the description and quality assurance of micro-credentials. This strengthens mutual understanding of what is happening in all these different sectors of public education. While it is essential that we keep in mind the different function of each sector, cross-sectoral endeavours will, over time, allow for many valuable combinations.

Imagine students from all three educational sectors collaborating on societal and other challenges, such as climate-proofing a neighbourhood or energy-neutral greenhouses. For the research sector, the focus is on developing knowledge. The higher professional sector looks at and explores practical applications. And the vocational sector knows how and is able to implement the solutions. We hope to see more of this collaborative approach in the future. Indeed, it improves the quality of solutions.

Lifelong learning

Learners, institutions and society all have their own perspective on micro-credentials. To bring these perspectives together, we are working jointly to bring about a change in culture. It should become increasingly normal for learners to pursue education appropriate to their needs and situation at any given time over the course of their professional lives. For an institution, the system becomes much more flexible and agile, allowing it to offer combinations demanded by society and the labour market. And for the outside world, it will become commonplace to take advantage of these new educational offerings.



Core team and connector for the Flexible Learning Pathways Transformation Hub of Npuls
From left to right Bram van der Kruk (captain), Paul den Hertog (connector), Ashwin Brouwer (captain),
Pauline Kamphorst (programme manager), Ulrike Wild (captain)

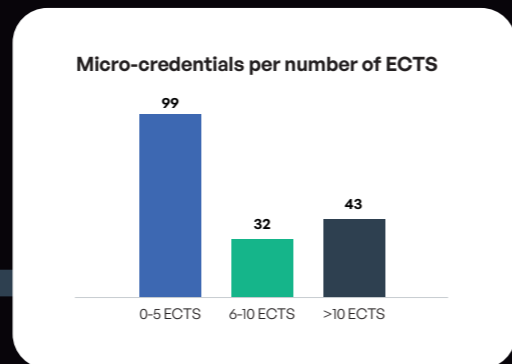
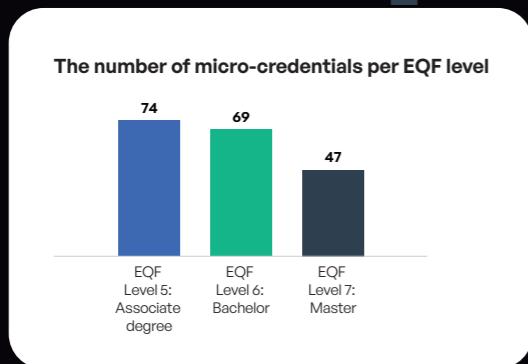
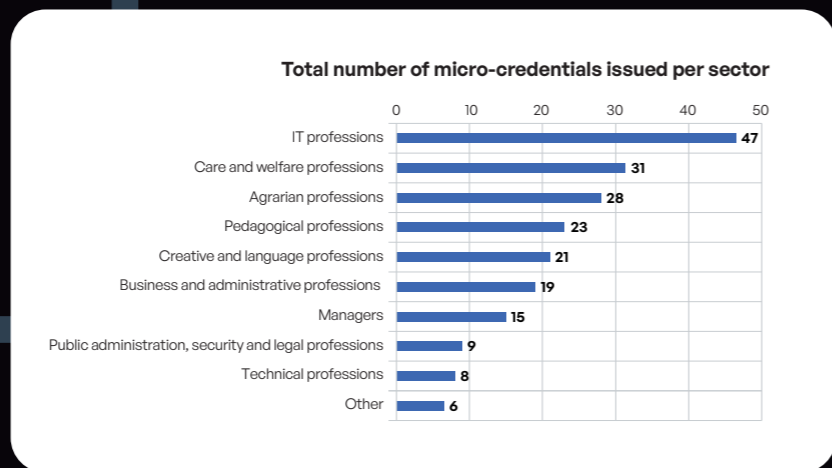
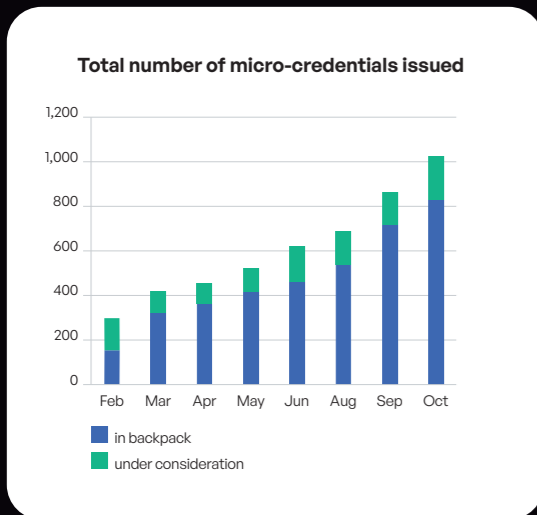
Today, there is still a dichotomy between initial education on the one hand and lifelong learning, which includes micro-credentials, on the other. We need to continue this conversation. The discussion about what should and should not be publicly funded will always be relevant. We do not expect the separation of initial and post-initial education to persist into the future.

This new approach requires us to take a close look at our system. Together with public institutions, we are discovering and developing the means by which we will continue to shape this systemic transformation. But the institutions cannot do it alone. This systemic transformation requires a comprehensive effort involving laws and regulations, funding, lecturers and staff, and society and culture. It is a complex playing field, but the essence is straightforward: trusted public institutions also provide high-quality educational offerings in smaller units. Who wouldn't want that?

“High-quality educational offerings of trusted public institutions provided in smaller units too. Who wouldn't want that?”

Micro-credentials Pilot in figures

IN THE NETHERLANDS, THE MICRO-CREDENTIALS PILOT FOR RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES AND UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES RAN FROM OCTOBER 2021 TO DECEMBER 2023. WHAT DID THE PILOT LOOK LIKE IN FIGURES?



The micro-credentials pilot in the Netherlands started on 1 October 2021 and ran until 31 December 2023.

Out of 36 universities of applied sciences, 22 took part in the pilot. Of the research universities, 12 out of 14 were on board.

MORE THAN **1,000** MICRO-CREDENTIALS WERE ISSUED THROUGH THE EDUBADGES SERVICE DURING THE PILOT PERIOD.

THE INSTITUTIONS JOINTLY OFFERED NEARLY **200** DIFFERENT MICRO-CREDENTIALS.

In the pilot, we collaborated with **291** colleagues from educational institutions, SURF and other stakeholders.

Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences both issued more than **200** micro-credentials.

THE 'INTRODUCTION TO PROGRAMMING' FROM MAKE IT WORK IS AWARDED **34** TIMES, MAKING IT THE MOST FREQUENTLY ISSUED MICRO-CREDENTIAL TO DATE.

The micro-credentials pilot has a comprehensive quality framework set by the sector associations.

From 1 January 2024, we will continue under the name 'Continuing to build on micro-credentials in higher education and research universities'

IN **2024**, MICRO-CREDENTIALS PILOT WILL ALSO START IN THE SECONDARY VOCATIONAL SECTOR.

The pilot featured **4** learning communities: Description of Micro-credentials, Communication, Quality Assurance & Logistics, Systems & Administration.

In total, the learning communities met **26** times. Project leaders from participating institutions met **18** times (nationwide).



By Nicole Bakker
Interview Mirjam Koster

Chair of the Executive Board of Graafschap College
Board member of MBO Raad (Digitalisation
and Lifelong Learning)
Member of the Npuls steering committee

MICRO-CREDENTIALS ARE RELEVANT FOR ALL TERTIAIR EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Although micro-credentials have been around for a long time and the term is often used in national and international policy documents, it seems as if I can now finally put it all together. And I'm not the only one; others are also finding this to be true. Elections for the European Parliament are due to be held in 2024. Education will once again be high on the agenda and will be seen even more as an integral part of the solution to our biggest challenges – the energy transition, the tight labour market and, for example, the impact of digitalisation and technology. What does that mean for the Netherlands? How do we keep the workforce in step with global developments while keeping it manageable at the national level? Micro-credentials are proving to be a surefire way for mutual understanding on what you are upskilling, retraining or learning, no matter at what stage of life.

Hydrogen

Micro-credentials are relevant for all tertiary education in the Netherlands. Bearing in mind the range outlined by Minister Dijkgraaf (Education), we are talking about secondary vocational, higher professional and higher academic education. In secondary vocational training, we will use micro-credentials in

post-initial education. In all the fields – from that range – in which we provide training and conduct research, we see innovations. Hydrogen and all the related developments, for example, may have a substantial impact on the automotive industry. Universities are conducting fundamental research into hydrogen and exploring future developments. And around the corner from us, the Automotive programme at Arnhem and Nijmegen University of Applied Sciences is developing new modules because of the demise of diesel and hydrogen as a potential replacement. This also applies to the Automotive programme at vocational training schools, where the subject of hydrogen is now part of the curriculum. As one of the lecturers explains: “Two years ago, the subject of hydrogen was Chapter 11 of the textbook; now there is an entire book about the development of hydrogen as a fuel.”

Accelerate through lifelong learning

If the Netherlands is to accelerate, for example in the impact of technology on healthcare, I would favour adopting the following approach more often in tertiary education: imagine we have an idea about

how technology could simplify work procedures in home care and we develop a module for that. Linking a micro-credential to that module would be the smart thing to do. This micro-credential indicates the level of the module, the study load and the learning outcomes achieved. Why is it smart to do it this way? Because it allows us to develop a module in one place and share it as a micro-credential – open source as far as I am concerned – nationwide. At the same time, you look at who wants to learn further, retrain or upskill, as existing healthcare workers may also want to take that module. If we make such a module recognisable and identifiable, it will be easier to implement in initial education. Lifelong learning is thus conducive to acceleration, both in post-initial and initial education.

Set of skills

This brings me to why I advocate this as being crucial for secondary vocational training as well. And I believe that for the workforce, it's increasingly about a set of skills you need to have. Let's say you obtained a degree in mechanical engineering from a university of applied sciences. It could be very interesting for you to follow the Robotic Welding micro-credential from a vocational training school (mbo level 4). You don't necessarily need to follow this at HBO level. Such a module, for say 120 study hours and 5 credits, is actually quite substantial. This is added to your set of skills/certificates/diplomas. If you do want to continue with robotics in the future and pursue a bachelor's degree, for example, your micro-credential is already added to the required credits.

Grensland College

Figures from labour market regions show that many people currently performing important work obtained their level 4 diploma years ago. In the meantime, their work has become increasingly complex as a result of various developments. These people would like to keep doing what they are doing but are looking for the next step in their professional development. That doesn't necessarily mean you have to enrol with a university of applied sciences for a full bachelor's degree. Level 5 training would be an interesting option for them. We are well on track in that area with Associate degree programmes in the Netherlands. While this form of training is at HBO level, we are seeing it taught more and by MBO and HBO lecturers in co-creation.

In our region, we have the Grensland College – an initiative of Saxion, HAN University of Applied Sciences and the Graafschap College. Grensland College offers Level-5 courses that you take for two years in parallel with your professional activities. You bring your practical case studies to your training and two years later, you have your Level 5 diploma. It is a truly powerful format, but getting enough participants in those groups is difficult.

Smart way

Sometimes people in employment want to take part in such training, but their employer cannot spare them. Take the engineering sector, for instance – there such a shortage of skilled workers that there is simply no time for employees to follow training programmes. Personal obstacles also often play a role: two years of training is quite a lot on top of all your other activities or commitments. Whereas, if you extend this thought further, you could argue that someone who is more broadly educated has less stress, is healthier, has fewer financial problems, and so on. It seems to me, therefore, expedient to link modules developed for Level 5* to the standard of a micro-credential as soon as possible. This means you can offer them as separate modules. Once we can unlock micro-credentials in this way for the business sector in the Netherlands, we will create a truly smart way to enhance people's skills.

*Level 5 modules are modules offered at associate degree level, the level between mbo level 4 and a bachelor's degree at the university of applied sciences. Associate degrees are part of the higher professional educational offer. The modules discussed in this article concern modules offered in partnership with universities of applied sciences.

Tip: Drop in at or check the website of a vocational training school near you to find out everything you can learn there and just how interesting and relevant the offer is. Even if you have studied at a research university or university of applied sciences!



“Micro-credentials are proving to be a great way to understand each other in terms of retraining or upskilling, no matter at what stage of your career you are.”

Micro-credentials in educational institutions

Project leaders explain

The Micro-credentials Pilot wouldn't have been a success without the project leaders in the educational institutions. What did the project leaders learn during the pilot, and why do they think it is such a valuable concept? We spoke with four project leaders about their experiences.



Klaar Vernailen, Micro-credentials project leader, Wageningen University & Research



Ellen Oostenenk, Micro-credentials project leader, Saxion University of Applied Sciences



Anja Kusters, Micro-credentials project leader at Avans University of Applied Sciences



Karen Slotman, Micro-credentials project leader at University of Twente

1. What is the added value of micro-credentials?

Klaar Vernailen (WUR): "With micro-credentials, you can continue to build on your future as a professional, where you determine your own learning pathway throughout your career. A future of lifelong learning, with a pathway where courses are recognised for their quality by both the education system and the professional field."

Ellen Oostenenk (Saxion): "By properly equipping students and professionals for existing and new professions, they can contribute to societal and economic issues where digitalisation plays a role. The current student population is unlikely to meet tomorrow's labour demand. This is why upskilling and retraining of pro-

professionals is becoming increasingly important. Micro-credentials meet this demand and thus make a significant contribution to lifelong learning."

"With micro-credentials, you can continue to build on your future as a professional, where you determine your own learning pathway throughout your career."

- Klaar Vernailen (WUR)

Anja Kusters (Avans): "I see the added value of micro-credentials in how professionals react when they receive them - they are really proud! And rightly so, as there is huge potential in micro-credentials. You can show the

result to an employer after only a relatively short learning process, for example. Moreover, recognition within all educational institutions is a major selling point. You can continue to develop flexibly with micro-credentials, in line with your personal learning needs and a rapidly changing field of work."

"For future micro-credentials, we want to become more demand-driven and collaborate with trade and industry; we see this as a win-win approach."

- Karen Slotman (UT)

Karen Slotman (UT): "To me, micro-credentials provide added value in four ways. First, modularity: micro-credentials offer you the opportunity to develop your knowledge and skills through shorter modules, which is easier and more feasible for many people than a full degree. Second, flexibility: micro-credentials allow you to adjust the pace of your own learning process to the amount of time you have. Third, topicality: micro-credentials allow institutions to respond rapidly to current developments and questions in society and make innovative techniques and research accessible to a wider audience. And fourth, visibility: micro-credentials allow you to share your learning outcomes easily, along with verification of the person's identity."

2. To what extent was it challenging to select or develop appropriate offerings in the institution that could be certified with a micro-credential?

Anja Kusters (Avans): "In our academy for part-time education, we already worked with separate modules, so that was a big advantage. We looked at which modules professionals who fit the target group of the pilot were participating in, and we ran those modules through our

quality scan. That quality scan has become the standard for us, both for new and existing modules. We also have modules developed specifically in consultation with the professional field. They truly see added value in the micro-credential and are keen to participate. That's obviously wonderful to see."

Klaar Vernailen (WUR): "When the pilot started, I thought the biggest challenge would lie in selecting a suitable courses of offerings. pretty soon we were able to put together a package that included mixed classrooms, individual courses from accredited online master's programmes and existing courses that sometimes needed only slight adjustments. The requirements to be recognised as a micro-credential are now taken into account as standard when developing new courses."

Ellen Oostenenk (Saxion): "Consider whether converting existing courses to micro-credentials is worthwhile, or whether it is better to develop new modules from scratch. In our experience, it is most efficient to start with micro-credentials in new educational material to be developed. Nevertheless, at our institution (Saxion), we already have a rich variety of modular courses for part-time education. Issuing or recognising a micro-credential for these would also have significant added value for both the professional and the labour market."

Karen Slotman (UT): "We started with a small and manageable educational offering at the University of Twente. We awarded a micro-credential for one component, for a course from an accredited master's programme. The challenge here was in marketing such an existing course for professionals. "For future micro-credentials, we want to become more demand-driven and collaborate with trade and industry; we really see this as a win-win approach."

"Converting' an existing offering into a micro-credential provided a huge quality boost!"

- Ellen Oostenenk (Saxion)

3. Quality assurance is an important aspect of micro-credentials. What did you learn about this during the pilot?

Anja Kusters (Avans): “We ensure quality beforehand, perform a scan for verification and only then put it on the agenda of the examination board. Our scan is based on the standards of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) and the quality framework of the pilot. This keeps it manageable for an examination board, as a lot of the work has already been done. Our lecturers often consider it a compliment if they are selected for the quality process and if they pass it, even more so.”

Ellen Oostenek (Saxion): “It was encouraging to see that ‘converting’ an existing educational offering to a micro-credential provided a quality boost. However, it is still quite a complicated process to get quality assurance embedded centrally in the institution at this stage. Connecting to existing practices and processes has not (yet) been sufficiently successful because this initiative is still really seen as a pilot. It is, to be sure, still a pilot and has been publicised as such nationwide. But going forward, we see the educational institution as having an important central role in this and this will certainly receive due attention. Another major challenge we face is the mutual recognition of micro-credentials between institutions.”

Klaar Vernailen (WUR): “Because the educational offerings we certify with micro-credentials were part of diploma-based programmes, a very large part of quality assurance was fortunately already in place!”

Karen Slotman (UT): “Before we start issuing micro-credentials for non-accredited education, we want to make progress in developing policies and an underlying framework in that area. We are currently working on that. Micro-credentials sometimes raise different questions than those generally asked in standard diploma-oriented programmes. Consider, for example, the deployment of lecturers from the field without a Basic Teaching Qualification, or transferring what you learn in the course to the professional’s work. We found the peer reviews to be very valuable in terms of quality assurance. These allow us to keep each other focused during this period when everything is still evolving.”

4. What other take-aways are there for you from the micro-credentials pilot?

Ellen Oostenek (Saxion): “As a project manager, you really have to have the capacity and courage to instigate change. Knowledge of and within the organisation is essential, as is an internal network. Make sure you have a project group that has the required mandate, support of the Executive Board, and is broadly staffed (communication, quality assurance, systems and processes, etc.). Link it to the institution’s vision, strategy and policy on lifelong learning, but also make it a part of flexible education. Make sure there is a connection with the institution, despite the fact that the status of ‘pilot’ may sometimes be perceived as a hurdle. Micro-credentials are becoming a more widespread development and offer many opportunities. Embrace these opportunities in the broader context towards future-proof education!”

Anja Kusters (Avans): “What I personally experienced as special was that at the first presentation of micro-credentials in the Netherlands, we also had another scoop: the first digital award ceremony online with an audience. That was pretty exciting! A director who has to push buttons while professionals, lecturers, colleagues and the press look on. This meets the sustainability goals of both Avans and the European Union. This is why I would definitely recommend an online ceremony like this to other institutions.”

Klaar Vernailen (WUR): “I think we need to make sure that employers and the market recognise and value micro-credentials more. In this way, you see that participants also start to value micro-credentials more. We have a micro-credential linked to a professional association, for example; there we really see more enthusiasm for the concept among participants.”

Karen Slotman (UT): “Micro-credentials are not a capstone of lifelong learning but are an integral part of it. It is important to have commitment at the institution level and to consider the vision and connection between the two. In this way, micro-credentials can enhance lifelong learning and vice versa.”



“Tap into your **creativity** in selecting education for micro-credentials.” “Lifelong learning is the **future**, but not everyone has reached that point yet!” “**Assessment** is important!” “Try to get the right people on board, from a **variety of organisations** and services, as you need them.” “It’s fun and useful to use your **green marker**, and not only your red marker.” “Invest time in getting to know the **context!**” “Work with **experiments**/pilots to take incremental steps, as you can also learn from them.” “Make sure there is **broad support** for the concept!” “It is important to have a pre-existing **vision of lifelong learning** into which you can incorporate the micro-credentials.” “Arrange the capacity of a **functional manager.**” “Collaborating with the **professional field** for a truly new micro-credentials module leads to better-attended courses.”

FOR THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

By Nicole Bakker
Interview Arthur Mol
rector magnificus
Wageningen University & Research,
Member of the Npuls steering committee

As a member of the steering committee of the Acceleration Plan, I came across micro-credentials early on in the process, and I was immediately enthusiastic about the concept. At Wageningen University & Research (WUR), we were able to introduce micro-credentials through participation in the pilot. Since then, we have set up a solid structure for lifelong learning, also known as Professional Education and Continuing Education. Over the past 2-3 years, we have made significant progress in making this more professional, embedding it better in the organisation and making the concept more widely known. For the purposes of Professional Education, micro-credentials appear to work extremely well. Lecturers understand exactly what the intention is – a micro-credential is an educational unit, for which you get credit, and that meets a given quality standard. At WUR, we have done a lot to raise awareness of micro-credentials, including making informative videos. Those efforts are now starting to bear fruit.

International collaboration

I'm convinced we're on course for a more flexible education system. What we need for this are small units that can be validated and that come with a certificate of quality. I see micro-credentials as an essential component of our agenda for more flexible education. As far as that goes, you can certainly call me a believer.

We have tried previously to take this step in initial education, but at the time it proved a bridge too far for universities. That said, I don't think we can do without it in the future. President Macron's 2018 European Universities Initiative (EUI) led to an impetus for greater flexibility in education throughout Europe. We see more international cooperation between universities, with greater exchange of small units of study that have to be validated. Micro-credentials are incredibly useful for that exchange.

Board of Continuing Education

At WUR, we have established a dedicated Board of Continuing Education for quality assurance of Continuing Education. We have, for some time now, had a Board of Education in initial education that is responsible for quality assurance.

Quality assurance is carried out continuously through various PDCA cycles. Similarly, we have now implemented a comparable principle for ensuring the quality of Continuing Education, including micro-credentials.

This Board is currently in the start-up phase and has been running for about a year. At the same time, quality assurance for micro-credentials is being integrated into the wider mainstream system of quality assurance. Quality assurance for micro-credentials is ensured through the evaluation of courses; it plays a role in quality assurance for lecturers, who must all have a Basic Teaching Qualification. We now also do those checks for lecturers in Continuing Education. You see the systems becoming more and more intertwined. I also think we are evolving progressively towards a quality assurance system that includes micro-credentials.

Institutional accreditation

This is also in line with our objective, which is institutional accreditation. This will allow us to secure quality assurance at the institutional level rather than at the level of individual programmes. Study programmes are, after all, becoming much less uniform. By showing that an institution has sufficient control and monitoring mechanisms, feedback loops and improvement programmes, you can demonstrate that quality is assured at an adequate level. The Dutch government still has a number of steps to take, however, and we are in full discussion on these matters. We are, in the meantime, already moving in that direction with WUR. It is not that strange, as the educational units we provide in regular education are also found in Continuing Education and micro-credentials. Moreover, they are also largely provided by the same lecturers.

Catalyst for Lifelong Learning

We recently submitted a proposal in "green education" for one of the LLD-Catalyst calls. The initiative, which involves a vocational training school and a university of applied sciences spans the entire green chain. We want to arrange lifelong learning offerings for a specific topic, validated by micro-credentials. Quality assurance is also something we seek to achieve with the entire educational chain. I think that's a great development. Circularity – a hot topic within the areas of

agriculture and food – is another example. It is an issue that is relevant at different levels, from secondary vocational training to research university level. We aim to add micro-credentials to different courses within this broad spectrum, creating a varied range of educational offerings with added value.

This is how we intend to achieve the objectives. Working in collaboration with different partners, but also from WUR itself, we will create offerings in different subject fields. In programmes like this, the emphasis on the regional aspect can sometimes be complex for us. This is because at WUR, we have a number of unique knowledge domains that operate on a national level, for which it is more efficient to set up a national programme.

Laws and regulations

Looking to the future, I see room for improvement by the legislature in terms of laws and regulations. Earlier I mentioned institutional accreditation, which would help tremendously. Regarding the use of micro-credentials in initial training, I am not entirely sure whether any legislative measures are required. I do expect a lot from developments in the European system, where there will be more emphasis on micro-credentials.

This would help immensely in exchange opportunities for students. Now, it is often still personalised for each individual student, where you have to look at the level of subjects passed and how that can be included in a programme at WUR. This becomes impossible when you start envisaging large flows of students. Micro-credentials can play an important role here and contribute to more cooperation and exchange

Recommendation

I would like to extend the following recommendation to the new Education Minister, who has yet to be appointed at the time of production of this magazine: make it a priority to actively pursue institutional accreditation. Besides making the system much more convenient and straightforward, it will also give the sector a lot of confidence. At WUR, it is not accreditation that drives continuous quality improvement. Rather, it is the professionalism of the lecturers, the commitment of the students who demand good education and of course the administrators, who also want things to go well. An incredible amount of exchange, innovation, and quality improvement takes place in that triangle, so it would be especially valuable if the Education Minister were to express confidence in this process.

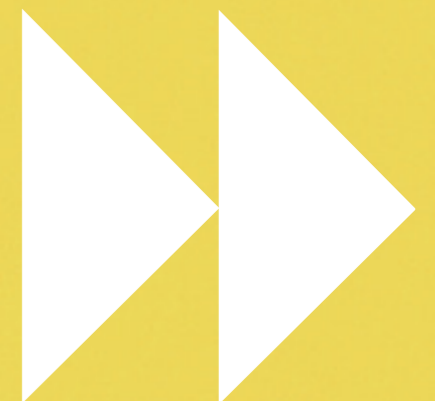
Fascination

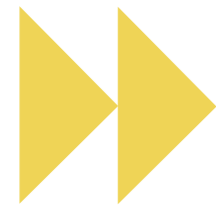
It continues to fascinate me that we started the micro-credentials pilot with 32 participating institutions. I don't recall us ever running a pilot with so many institutions before, both research universities and universities of applied sciences. It just goes to show the tremendous interest in micro-credentials. Even administrators sense that something of fundamental importance to the future of education is happening here. I think they are absolutely right about that. Micro-credentials are an essential part of educational development. Bearing in mind the results of the last election, the government may have other ideas and push this down the road for a few years. But it is such a powerful movement at the moment that not taking part in it will seriously set us back. 🌑



A closer look at the micro- credentials pilot

By Bart Lamboo
and Kiki Leijdekkers





THE MICRO-CREDENTIALS PILOT WAS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY – WE WERE ABLE TO TAKE MICRO-CREDENTIALS A STEP FURTHER IN EDUCATION, AND IT WORKED. NO FEWER THAN 34 INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TOOK PART IN THE PILOT. TOGETHER, WE HAVE LEARNED, SHARED, CELEBRATED AND, ABOVE ALL, WORKED HARD DURING THIS PILOT PERIOD. AEF RESEARCH AGENCY EVALUATED THE PROCESS. WE TAKE YOU THROUGH SOME LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSIONS AFTER MORE THAN TWO YEARS OF THE MICRO-CREDENTIALS PILOT.

Enthusiasm for micro-credentials

The educational sector is interested in micro-credentials, as is evident from the number of institutions that took part in the pilot. Since the beginning of the pilot, about two thirds of public institutions of higher education have joined, despite the considerable commitment required from institutions to participate in the pilot. Universities of applied sciences and research universities see great potential in micro-credentials.

Preference for smaller micro-credentials

The size of issued micro-credentials varies in the pilot, the quality framework states educational units no smaller than 3 ECTS and no larger than 30 ECTS. Despite the variation in the size of micro-credentials, AEF sees a preference: educational institutions mainly develop offerings of around 5-6 ECTS. Less use is made of the scope to develop micro-credentials of relatively large size.

Wide range of offerings

In just over two years (i.e. during the pilot period), the offer increased to 200 courses for which learners can earn micro-credentials. Institutions started actively developing offerings linked to micro-credentials, and the range is quite diverse – from a micro-credential for teaching support roles in special education to digital adviser or project-based work in healthcare.

Micro-credentials were mostly issued in sectors with a shortage of skilled workers. The pilot gave participating institutions the freedom to experiment with offerings of their own choice, as long as they were in line with the institution's research & education portfolio. Looking at the total offer of micro-credentials, one thing stands out: they were mostly issued in sectors with a shortage of skilled workers, such as IT, Care & Welfare and Education. Participating educational institutions indicate that they see improved alignment of education with labour market needs as one of the benefits of micro-credentials.

Furthermore, institutions mainly offer micro-credentials within the domain of their expertise. For example, WUR offers micro-credentials in food research and Delft University of Technology focuses on micro-credentials in the aerospace engineering programmes.

Administrative support is essential

Institutions that have put the development of micro-credentials high on the agenda at the administrative level experience more freedom as well as support in implementing micro-credentials in the educational institution. Administrative support is essential to secure sufficient resources and capacity.

Current administrative systems within institutions are focused mainly on initial students. As a result, lifelong learning offerings often fall by the wayside in terms of the use of facilities.

In general, the participating institutions are positive about the link with the edubadges service, SURF's platform where micro-credentials are issued as digital certificates. As such, the Netherlands has one of the best-functioning digital solutions in Europe. The edubadges service offers not only micro-credentials but also other badges. It is not clear to everyone that micro-credentials are subject to stricter quality requirements than most other badges. The edubadges service is working on linking their system to the most widely used student information systems. Institutions are very positive about this, as it meets their needs.

Frameworks, but also freedom

All micro-credentials issued within the pilot must comply with the pilot's quality framework, which was adopted administratively by the VH and UNL sector associations. This framework states the quality requirements each micro-credential has to meet. These requirements are similar to those we have for accredited courses. Furthermore, the framework states what information can be found in each certificate; for example, the learning outcomes, an indication of the EQF level and study load of the micro-credential.

Despite the differences between institutions, they have developed an offer that meets the predefined frameworks and agreements regarding quality assurance. These provide sufficient freedom for participating institutions' own interpretation while ensuring uniformity. During the pilot phase, institutions exchanged experiences and shared knowledge, but did not take any action towards mutual recognition of micro-credentials. In the follow-up to the pilot, this will be a topic for further collaboration.

Micro-credentials not yet widely known

Participating institutions see micro-credentials as an effective means of reducing labour shortages. However, institutions indicate that micro-credentials are still relatively unknown. In the professional field, and that employers could be better informed and connected to the topic.

Legal recognition

In order to make micro-credentials a sustainable proposition, questions around funding and legal issues need to be addressed further. Micro-credentials are currently not recognised under the Dutch Higher Education and Scientific Research Act (WHW) or in the Education and Vocational Training Act (WEB). This sometimes makes it difficult for employers, employees and other stakeholders to understand the concept of micro-credentials.

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has set up a working group that includes industry associations and employers' organisations. The working group is looking into what is needed to give micro-credentials a place in the Dutch education system. Many participating institutions are identifying bottlenecks in the pilot that can be attributed to the lack of legal recognition. Vocational training schools, universities of applied sciences and research universities as well as the national Npuls projects need support from the Ministry to give micro-credentials a permanent place in education. 🌑

“In due course, innovative educational units will only have to be developed once”



Case study: Centre for Innovative Studies in Water Management

The Netherlands Centre for Innovative Studies in Water Management (CIV Water) is a public-private partnership (PPP) in Friesland that focuses on training agile professionals. Ever since its inception in 2013, CIV Water has taken a distinctive approach. This centre is a prime example for Europe of how education and business can work together to innovate education quickly and with lasting effects – and drive innovation in other areas.

By Maureen van Althuis



Encouraging people to seek new knowledge themselves

“In the current form of education, lecturers contribute to students’ development by sharing their knowledge. That knowledge is usually limited to the institution, has no bearing on real-life situations and is often somewhat outdated. In other words, you are teaching “yesterday’s” subjects. What you want is to include lecturers in what is happening in the business world and use that knowledge to train the professionals of tomorrow.”

At CIV Water, it soon became clear that sending employees on courses once a year was not the best way to train agile professionals. “We want to encourage people to seek new knowledge themselves, for professionals to ask themselves how they can keep up to speed and integrate change into their work.”

Vending machine: variety and quality

Development and training of the agile professional CIV Water envisages is the ambition of the associated educational and professional fields.

How is this achieved? Hoekstra explains it by comparing it with a snack vending machine. “You see all these snacks – innovative educational modules in our case – on display, you insert money, open a hatch and consume the snack of your choice. At another time, you pick a different snack.”

“There is of course a quality requirement attached to each “snack” in our example, or educational module, and we need to be able to compare this with other regions but also internationally. I am going to Estonia as part of our PoVE Water international programme, in which we are collaborating with five regions. You want to promote the exchange of professionals, but how

Pieter Hoekstra, programme manager at CIV Water, dives into the details straight away: “An agile professional not only has the right knowledge and skills, but also the right professional attitude to effectively implement changes in work processes. They take ownership of their work and are able to make agile adjustments so that innovations can be developed and integrated faster.”

Hoekstra originally taught economics and law, then made a switch to the business world and from there came into contact with CIV Water. For him, his current role brings everything together: the relevance of his background as a lecturer, experience in projects and programmes and knowledge of water management. He has a sense of the freedom of entrepreneurship and sees himself as the epitome of an agile professional.

Extracting knowledge from the company

“The strength of the PPP structure lies in sharing knowledge and joint responsibility for developing professionals,” he continues. He explains how at CIV Water, large companies such as Vitens and Wetskip are collaborating on practical case studies with their own employees and MBO students. Their distinctive approach was born out of this collaboration.

“What we have done is translate organisational questions into development pathways for incumbent professionals. Our first step was to look at what knowledge the organisation itself had, and then use that knowledge in the development process. Filling in the details of the development process with a lecturer creates a didactic approach that draws on case studies. The lecturer participates in the team, adopts the knowledge and translates it back to teaching practice. In some of the development projects, students were also involved. This creates an entirely different dynamic.”



Pieter Hoekstra,
programme manager
CIV Water

do you measure the exchangeability of professionals in the Netherlands compared to, say, Estonia? With micro-credentials, this will be possible.”

Meeting regional needs

At CIV Water, the idea behind micro-credentials has been a reality for much longer. “We work with modules and translate that into educational units. What we don’t have yet is official recognition of these units, such as a micro-credential. We currently offer stand-alone electives and it takes time to get them accredited. And time is the one thing we don’t have.

With recognition in the form of micro-credentials, Hoekstra expects many employed people to be much more inclined to say ‘I’ll do that, I’m going to continue to develop’, giving a huge boost to lifelong learning and the possibility of stacking credits. “We are not getting more students, so we will have to focus on keeping incumbents up to speed and retraining lateral entrants and career switchers.”

Leeuwarden: blueprint for European programme

CIV Water’s approach has attracted international attention. In Leeuwarden, CIV Water is part of Water-Campus – an innovative ecosystem in which education is provided by vocational training schools as well as universities of applied sciences and research universities. This consortium focuses on the development of water technology and water quality, is supported by the National Growth Fund of the Dutch government and also works extensively with European research grants and projects.

“Brussels is keenly following what we are doing with vocational training. Dutch vocational training is highly regarded in Europe. We are currently creating the blueprint for a European programme in which we will be working with several member states to look at how agile professionals can be mobilised at this level of education.”

“We are also working on innovative learning units, such as e-learning courses with VR glasses. You only need to make these once, after which you can use them in several places. If you can recognise these educational units with a micro-credential, they can be applied in any region and anywhere in the world.”

Don’t teach students answers, but give them a problem

Interest in CIV Water’s approach is spreading to other sectors as well. CIV Water receives enquiries from all over the country and collaborates with educational institutions outside its own region. “It is no longer just about substantive knowledge of water; it is also about the form of education. By having students solve practical cases, you will be asking different things of them. You don’t teach them answers, you give them a problem and they have to solve it themselves.” This allows them to develop research, communication, collaboration, networking and IT skills – skills that last a lifetime.

This is exactly where micro-credentials can provide a solution. Because micro-credentials are about learning outcomes and competencies, companies can immediately see what the relevant expertise is. Does this meet their needs, what is still required to achieve a continuous learning line? By training people with a view to professional roles and developing their competencies, they become much more employable, is Hoekstra’s vision.

“For employers, it is beneficial to know what someone can do and how amenable they are to development. The flexibility to quickly adopt something new is much more important than memorising a sequence.”



Everything under scrutiny

“If we take the big problems in society as a starting point and tackle them on the basis of collaboration, maybe we will finally break through the challenges around lifelong learning in the Netherlands.”

With that shared mission, hundreds of people from knowledge and educational institutions, regional collaborations and national organisations collaborated on a plan for the future during the summer of 2021. Now, two and a half years on, that mission has truly taken off. The LLD-Catalyst programme will award the first projects of regional collaborations for lifelong learning in early 2024. These projects address the energy and raw materials transition as well as professional development processes in which the educational institution itself is addressed. Taking the societal challenge as a starting point, pioneering, learning and upscaling take place throughout the education chain, including through the use of micro-credentials.

Everyone who becomes involved in the LLD-Catalyst does so for the same reason: to work on a solution that will structurally give people in the Netherlands the opportunity to deepen, broaden and renew their knowledge and skills through content and working methods that actually benefit them. In short, more and better lifelong learning. Why is this important? Because it is good for individuals, employers, the economy and society.

It is easy to share the dream, but a lot harder to put it into practice. After all, lifelong learning has been offered in various forms for many years. Think of the many part-time courses, dual learning pathways, executive programmes, MOOCs and other types of lifelong learning that have been organised for years by secondary vocational, higher vocational and academic institutions in addition to the large market of training for professionals offered by private institutions. But even though all this has been on offer for many years, figures on lifelong learning participation in the Netherlands have not been particularly strong for many years either. We don't often participate in development programmes, and when we do, we don't do it structurally unless it is required and paid for (e.g. by a professional group).

Moreover, because the figures focus mainly on participation (why not, who does/does not, etc.), little consideration is given to whether what we do adds real value: do people benefit from the retraining, further training or upskilling they receive? And how do you determine if the quality is good enough

It is too convenient to simply assert: “then we will pay for everything and make everything compulsory”. There are several levers we can pull to get the desired outcome. It starts with us. What we have done as education sector so far is not good enough. Our role in lifelong learning must be different. All of us, in all our educational organisations, need to go back to basics: the individual for whom education is organised. We need to re-examine what content and what learning and working methods are useful to them. Rather than offering the programmes we already have, we should consider what kinds of lifelong learning pathways will enable them to be more active in the economy and in society. That means connecting to big issues regarding which we have something to offer. We need to get a better understanding of how people make sense and make space to develop and engage in better dialogue. We must offer them something they can use; therefore we must develop the educational offer in tandem with the working environment and the economic chains people are active in. That being said, we cannot create a new individual programme for every individual. So how do we organise it, and how do we ensure it is accessible – both in terms of form and affordability?

Everything has to come under scrutiny. Fortunately, there are good ideas about all these issues and components of practices that are already working. By working with existing and new methods, keeping a close eye on what works and what does not – and why – we are building a new lifelong learning ecosystem together. Here, too, I expect we will see and learn a lot from micro-credentials.

Annemieke van Barneveld-Biesma,
(former) UNL liaison for the LLD-Catalyst

Edubadges: issuing digital certificates to learners



Edubadges is SURF's secure and reliable platform where institutions in secondary and higher education can issue edubadges to learners (students and professionals). Edubadges are digital certificates that allow learners to demonstrate the learning outcomes and competencies they possess. Learners can easily share their edubadges with employers or educational institutions, for example on LinkedIn. The recipient can view the shared edubadge and verify it for authenticity.

Edubadges and micro-credentials

Micro-credentials are issued via edubadges. To this end, SURF and the micro-credentials pilot of universities of applied sciences and research universities collaborated during the pilot period. This close collaboration allowed the platform to respond to the needs of the pilot in the best possible way. SURF regularly joins the learning communities organised from within the pilot and remains closely involved in the follow-up to the pilot.

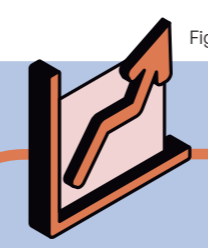
Going ahead at full speed

Edubadges continues to develop at full speed. In collaboration with educational institutions, SURF continues to improve and expand the platform with new functionalities, such as the link with Student Information Systems (SIS). SURF also ensures continuous alignment with new standards, techniques and developments within the Netherlands and Europe in the field of digital credentials.

Edubadges in figures

- SURF launched the platform in 2020.
- Today, 38 public educational institutions use the platform, including 4 secondary vocational institutions, 22 universities of applied sciences and 12 research universities.
- In total, more than 8,500 learners hold edubadges and 13,000 edubadges have been issued.

Figures are from January 2024



Rob van der Werff – edubadges product manager at SURF
“The edubadges service continues to develop at full speed. Together with the institutions, we are continuously working to improve and expand the platform with new functionalities.”

Want to know more about edubadges?

Visit www.surf.nl/en/services/edubadges

DIGITAL CERTIFICATES



Why this infographic?

Digital certificates, also known as edubadges, are increasingly used within Dutch tertiary education (vocational training, higher professional education and academic higher education). With this digital certificate, an educational institution issues proof of acquired knowledge and competencies to the learner. In this brochure, we clarify what these digital certificates are and what variants are in use.

More about the edubadges service

You can find more information about the edubadges service at: www.surf.nl/en/services/edubadges



What are edubadges and how are they related to micro-credentials?

SURF www.edubadges.nl is the national platform for digital certificates in the Dutch tertiary education system. All digital certificates issued on the edubadges platform are called edubadges. Edubadges is therefore a collective name for several variants of digital certificates, which can be issued through the edubadges service. A microcredential is a specific edubadge with a nationally or even internationally recognised quality framework endorsed by the sector association(s).

Variants of digital certificates: regular, micro-credential and extra-curricular

When using edubadges, we distinguish the following three variants.



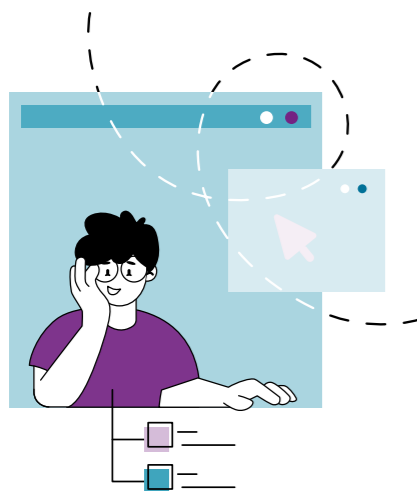
Regular: A regular digital certificate is part of an accredited training course; which means it involves an educational unit of a recognised diploma pathway.



Micro-credential: A digital certificate with a nationally or even internationally recognised quality framework. The adopted quality framework describes how the quality of the micro-credential is assured.



Extra-curricular: A digital certificate can also be awarded for non-accredited/recognised or extra-curricular education. No form of credits or formal recognition is attached to this.



edubadges



Regular edubadge

Example
ICT and software engineering semester 1



Micro-credential

Example
Badge issued by the Pilot Micro-credential:

National/International quality framework



Extra-curricular edubadge

Example

- Executive year
- Professional development for lecturers
- Deskresearch

Quality requirements of the institution

ECTS / Study Hours

Time Investment

What knowledge and skills have been demonstrated?

Who demonstrated this?

Who determined this?

How was this established?

Developments in micro-credentials

Micro-credentials is a hot topic, both inside and outside the Netherlands, with considerable development taking place and experience being gained by stakeholders.

Want to know more?

European developments regarding micro-credentials

On 16 June 2022, the European Council adopted a recommendation on micro-credentials. In doing so, the Council aims to encourage the development, implementation and recognition of micro-credentials. The recommendation includes several building blocks, including a definition of micro-credentials and standard elements for the description of a microcredential.

You can find the Council's recommendation [here](#).

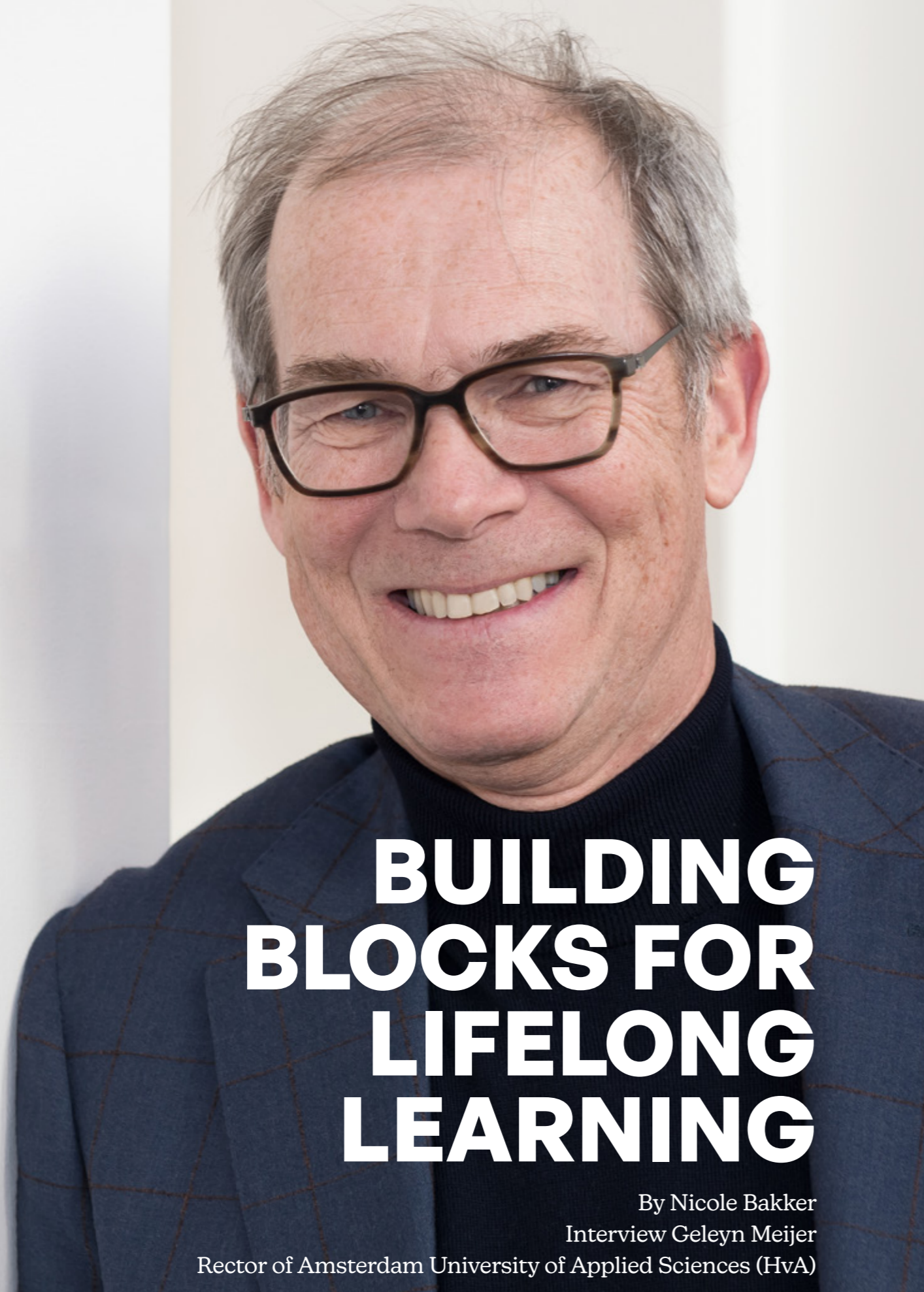


Microcredentials in the Netherlands

Dutch secondary vocational institutions, universities of applied sciences and research universities are currently building experience with and taking the first steps towards implementing micro-credentials in two projects initiated by Npuls. You can read more about the methodology and developments around micro-credentials in these projects and the quality agreements used on this web page.



SURF



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

By Nicole Bakker
Interview Geleyn Meijer
Rector of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA)



“Make IT Work”, a training programme with a job guarantee that has been around since 2015, has taught us as Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA) a lot about a specific target group: employed people with a diploma seeking further development. Our goal is to serve that group by providing a quality guarantee. You might ask why a quality guarantee is important if you can already demonstrate with a certificate that you have completed the retraining course. While that may be the case now, over time the certificate may decrease in value. Moreover, it can be difficult to compare such certificates with other certificates. It has therefore been proposed to issue micro-credentials for following a small unit of education “in something”. That something – how it is described and what it represents – will have been thought about and recorded somewhere. Just as we do for regular diplomas, which take 3 to 4 years to complete.

Sectors with a shortage of skilled workers

The impetus to do this now is driven primarily by demand in sectors with a shortage of skilled workers. These are sectors we already know suffer from a shortage of skilled workers. Take, for example, the energy transition we are currently experiencing. This transition requires new insights, which in turn will lead to new professions. This creates a demand for a wide range of professionals for jobs related to energy technology, but also, for example, professionals who can design services or understand the business management aspect. For while it seems that we will be able to solve the challenges we face through technology, the major bottleneck lies with the people (or lack of people) needed to roll out such technology.

Stackable value

Many people who already have qualifications want to work in those sectors but often lack specific knowl-

edge or skills. This is where micro-credentials can play a key role.

In this way, you give the people you train something that is of value but at the same time is also stackable. Stackable means that you can use the knowledge gained from one course later as a foundation for another course. It opens up opportunities for continuous self-development, including later on in your career. This, in essence, is the objective of lifelong learning. This also has value for employers, as it allows them to recruit people with whom they can take the next step in the organisation’s future.

Robust design

We are talking about sectors with an acute shortage of skilled workers here, but you could of course extend this to various other professions. Take professions in the economic domain or social services, to name a few; domains where it is self-evident for people to start their studies, gain work experience after completing them, and then take the next step in further development. This approach is suited to the scope of our entire education system. That is why it is so pertinent for us to establish something solid with Npuls. If we fail to do so, we will soon find ourselves in a mire of credentials and paperwork that will ultimately undermine the value of the entire system.

Skills

Employers generally just want to know what someone can do, what skills or competencies someone has. You could therefore consider a kind of passport in which all your skills are recorded, comparable to an electronic patient record. There is already a European skills taxonomy, a list of all possible skills. Once you can recognise these skills in the form of awarding micro-credentials, you start tying the two worlds together. That, I think, is the future.

Quality assurance

But we haven't reached that point yet. With Npuls, we are going to ensure that we develop the techniques further, demonstrate that micro-credentials work and encourage further adoption. The issue of quality assurance is also on the agenda. I can assert that, at least as HvA, we have a strong preference for the idea of institutional accreditation. However, you have to actually set up such a system. In the Netherlands, unfortunately, we have not yet progressed as far with this as in Flanders, for example.

Benefits of participation

Participating in the pilot programmes is providing a wealth of experience for HvA. For example, on how people value the idea of crediting "chunks" of education. We are also learning when this is less suitable. It is not necessarily useful for younger people, because you give them a lot of freedom and choices within a study programme. That is why micro-credentials are somewhat less relevant for courses specifically aimed at students pursuing their first diploma or degree.

Lifelong learning linked to research

As HvA, our ambition is to be the ultimate knowledge partner for lifelong learning in our region. Because we are a public institution, I think it is also crucial to link lifelong learning to our research programmes. Micro-credentials also play a role here. Take for example healthcare, where technology plays an increasingly bigger role. We want senior citizens to be able to live healthier and happier lives in their own living environment for longer. We will increasingly use robotics, technology or other means to set up their home situation in such a way as to enable this. All these developments require specific professional qualifications. You want to teach people with a medical background to work with that technology and vice versa. You also want to be able to familiarise technically trained people with what it is like to implement technology in a healthcare environment.

Lifelong learning offerings, for which you issue micro-credentials, is an ideal way to achieve this. At the same time, you make sure the offer is always up to date with the help of researchers working in these areas. In this way, we bring knowledge from research directly into education.

And through education, it reaches society. We should be looking at that approach more in the Netherlands. Given the challenges we face, we should not focus solely on creating startups that come up with new things. Obviously, that is also very important, but I don't think it's the only way." 🗨️

Tip: I would strongly recommend smaller institutions that are interested in getting started with micro-credentials, but are unable to do so due to lack of capacity, to take part in Npuls. We need to form alliances for the future of education. It makes little difference whether the knowledge comes from a smaller art college, a vocational training school, HvA or, say, InHolland. Because of their size, larger institutions have slightly more opportunities to experiment with micro-credentials. But then they would have to actually make them available to learners. Collaboration is crucial in this respect.



EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AWARD MICRO-CREDENTIALS

PLEASE NOTE: THESE MESSAGES ON X WERE ORIGINALLY IN DUTCH AND ARE TRANSLATED TO ENGLISH.



SOURCE: X, FEBRUARY 2023

@socialestudies

On Wednesday 8 February, at the Academy of Social Studies, Hanzehogeschool Groningen, the first micro-credentials were awarded to five students of the Youth and Family Professional programme.

#LLO #microcredentials

@HvA

Friday, the first micro-credentials (digital partial certificates) were awarded by @ITOMscholing. This is attractive for people who are interested in lifelong learning and want more control over their own learning pathway.

#amsterdam

#hogeschoolvanamsterdam

#LLO



SOURCE: X, OCTOBER 2022



INVESTING IN VALUABLE KNOWLEDGE WITH MICRO- CREDENTIALS

By Maureen van Althuis

To respond more rapidly to technological developments and the great need for specialised IT staff, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences is setting an example with Make IT Work. This is a retraining programme in which students earn micro-credentials.

“This is how you make talent sustainably employable.”

“A micro-credential says something about a small unit of study and provides recognition,” Ronald Kleijn explains. Ronald is programme leader of Make IT Work, a unique retraining programme for careers in IT at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA). “It focuses on the individual and their learning needs to advance their careers.”

Students take courses at HvA for five months. Students find a match with an employer before they even start the programme. This way, they know where they will work after their retraining or upskilling. They receive an offer with a six-month job guarantee, with the intention of permanent employment.

Educational units that are awarded with micro-credentials are related to each other, but do not necessarily form a coherent whole. “One advantage of this is that you can make educational offerings loosely coupled and therefore focus on what is important to a student at that point in their studies or future career,” says Ronald.

Having a skill versus having a skill AND recognition of that skill. Make IT Work student Soheil now has thirteen micro-credentials and a job with an international IT organisation. He received the micro-credentials from his educational institution through SURF’s edubadges platform. “Micro-credentials are extremely useful,” says Soheil. “They are certificates based on skills you have acquired. I put them on my LinkedIn profile so that employers can immediately see what I have done and what I can do.”

“Make IT Work bridged the gap between my education and the the first step in my career.”

Soheil, student at Make IT Work

Unlike certificates, which show the title of a course and a date, micro-credentials provide much more detail. “Micro-credentials show what has been learned, what material has been used, what has been tested and who tested it,” says Ronald. You give a student something really useful”.

With a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering and a background in frontend development, Soheil lacked the skills for backend programming, which is where he envisioned his future career path. “I wanted hands-on experience in programming. Make IT Work provided the full package and bridged the gap between my education and the first step in my career.”

Sustainable employability of talent

“Micro-credentials help us speak the same language,” says Rick-Jan Scheepe, DICTU Academy coordinator and strategic adviser for Learning & Development at DICTU, one of the largest IT service providers in the Dutch central government. “It really says something if you complete a module at a university of applied sciences.”



“Making educational offerings loosely coupled”

Ronald Kleijn, programme leader at Make IT Work

(photo: Monique Kooijmans)

DICTU has been collaborating with Make IT Work for many years, and Rick-Jan sees huge potential in micro-credentials. “Micro-credentials provide information about someone’s skills. This means that even if you don’t know someone, you can be confident that you can make a selection based on micro-credentials and be confident that someone has the necessary knowledge.”

“What’s so great about a micro-credential is that it is small and manageable.” He highlights the advantage of being able to exchange employees more effectively because of this – both within and outside the organisation. “This way you make talent sustainably employable.”



“I put the micro-credentials on my LinkedIn profile”

Soheil, student at Make IT Work

Serious credential from which students can derive rights

IT company MyBit Group has been recruiting students from Make IT Work for a number of years. CEO Marcel Flipse values the fact that micro-credentials are recognised and that they make it much easier to compare modules.

“Before, we would train people ourselves. The benefit of Make IT Work is that candidates have had recognised training. Students can derive rights from this badge; it is a serious credential. It provides certainty. For the students themselves, now and in the future, and also for employers.”

“The people who come to MyBit through Make IT Work are smart, motivated people – each and every time. They are often somewhat older and already have a degree from a university of applied sciences or a research university. They are retraining in IT, for example a psychologist who is interested in psychology but not the patient care side of the profession. Or a guitar player in a rock band, who always had a penchant for IT and wanted more structure after entering a different stage of life, deciding to become a programmer. And a good one at that!”

Personalised educational offerings

“Sometimes it’s much better to invest in skills someone still has to get under their belt for a career, rather than spending time on existing skills that were already covered in a study programme,” says Marcel. “Micro-credentials help to develop and select talent with more precision. There are professions that already do this, such as lawyers and accountants and the continuing education credits they need. I think you will start to see this more in mainstream education as well.”



“Develop and select talent with more precision”

Marcel Flipse, CEO of MyBit Group

“It helps when we have building blocks, such as micro-credentials, which allow students to put together a package targeted to their individual needs.”

Rick-Jan Scheepe, strategic adviser for Learning & Development at DICTU



“You are making talent sustainably employable”

Rick-Jan Scheepe, DICTU Academy coordinator and strategic adviser for Learning & Development at DICTU

Rick-Jan adds that these days, it is almost impossible for organisations to recruit exactly the professionals they need for their tasks and ambitions. “You have to look for people you can train towards that goal, and it helps enormously when there are building blocks, such as micro-credentials, which allow students to put together a personalised package targeted to their individual needs.”

Significant added value

Soheil completed the retraining programme and received his Make IT Work certification, like other students in his class. But not everyone has the same micro-credentials. “Because of Make IT Work, I came to really enjoy backend development and specialised in it. Although frontend and backend work in tandem, you don’t have to be skilled in both to become a good software engineer.” It has become quite a challenge for institutions to properly administer modular education. The micro-credentials approach helps organisations invest in what is truly valuable, and all interviewees are in agreement that once micro-credentials become a standard offering, it will be of significant added value..

THE NETHERLANDS AMONG THE FRONT-RUNNERS: NOT WAITING, BUT TAKING ACTION

By Maureen van Althuis



Throughout Europe, EU member states are implementing micro-credentials. Dutch educational institutions have pulled together from the beginning and now we rank among the frontrunners. That said, we can still learn a lot from neighbouring countries. We spoke with Scilla van Cuijlenborg, trailblazer for micro-credentials at MBO Raad and Paul den Hertog, senior adviser for flexible education at SURF, about the distinctive approach in the Netherlands, the Irish example and Europe's high ambitions.

"In Europe, there is a solid vision on the use and value of micro-credentials. The European Commission wants to communicate the value of micro-credentials effectively and has expressed a desire to avoid situations such as in the US," says Scilla. "It's about not flooding the market with a proliferation of certificates of which the value is not clear to the user – the learner. It is also an EU-wide ambition for education to properly serve the market for lifelong learning."

Scilla has had a long career in education, where she has always operated at the interface between societal innovations and educational adjustments. "The micro-credentials approach has gained momentum and everyone has their own idea of what that looks like. As a trailblazer, I bring those visions together; the perspectives of educational institutions, learners, government, Europe, business and various associated bodies."

Paul has also worked in education his entire career. In the Acceleration Plan, he collaborated on initiatives around flexible education, including the micro-credentials pilot at universities of applied sciences and research universities. Now he is pushing for further cooperation between vocational training schools, universities of applied sciences and research universities. "At Npuls, we are currently looking at how experiences in universities of applied sciences and research universities are stacking up against the pilot that is starting in vocational training schools. And how to position everything we do side by side and in context."

The pathways for vocational training, higher professional education and academic education in Europe

Recognising and accrediting micro-credentials across Europe is, in essence, what it's all about. "It means we have to make agreements with 27 member states," Scilla emphasises. "The path vocational training has to take in Europe for this is still a bit longer than that for higher professional education and academic education. This is because vocational training diplomas are not yet automatically mutually recognised in other countries, whereas bachelor's and master's degrees from universities of applied sciences and research universities are. While vocational training schools in the Netherlands have already made great strides in modularising their educational offerings and getting on board with lifelong learning, in Europe this is not yet a given for vocational training." For some countries, this is still a very new endeavour.

Vocational education in the Netherlands is way ahead compared to the rest of Europe. "We are fortunate that Dutch vocational training ranks among the best in the world," says Scilla. "At the same time, this does put us in a position of having a first-mover disadvantage. We see that other member states are now investing a lot in making education modular, whereas we are doing so within our own budget and funding system."

Dutch approach stands out

Paul is collaborating with a group of people from 14 member states in the European Digital Education Hub on micro-credentials and further implementation of the approach. "I think it's great that the Netherlands is one of the frontrunners in this area," says Paul. "This is because we did not wait to see what might happen but joined forces and took action immediately." In many other countries, universities of applied sciences and research universities are taking a more wait-and-see approach. "They are looking to the government, as in 'it is the government's responsibility'. Whereas in the Netherlands, we have said 'yes, it is the government's responsibility, but we understand how to organise education, including small courses. So let's get started!' In the Netherlands, we took a bottom-up approach." "Dutch educational institutions are highly autonomous and have a far more entrepreneurial vision," adds Scilla. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has always separated the "what" and "how" of education. As a result, Dutch educational institutions have much more freedom to respond to and capitalise on developments themselves. This is a cultural aspect. In many other member states, education is managed top-down. In Cyprus, for example, the government determines everything for the education sector. There, the curriculum is put together by civil servants."

Learning from your neighbours

One country even the Netherlands looks at with great admiration is Ireland, where there has long been a modular approach to education and a curriculum made up of smaller units. The entire organisation of Irish higher education is tailored to this modular approach. Micro-credentials are brought together in a portal and learners can select from that large collection. "It's truly amazing," says Paul. "You can see how, in Ireland, micro-credentials align perfectly with the Irish government's vision of lifelong learning. The fact that this is not (yet) the case in the Netherlands is a missed opportunity."

Austria is another country Paul is watching closely. "In the Netherlands, we have worked on a quality framework through peer reviews. These are steps in the right direction, but we're not there yet."

Austria has come a long way in arranging external supervision. Especially when private parties start offering micro-credentials, you want quality to be

assured transparently and effectively in higher professional education and academic education, both internally and externally."

Scilla: "The quality framework is important. It's about recognising and acknowledging each other's credentials, and that we have agreed with each other what the value of a credential is and what effect it should have. You can also secure quality in another way." Scilla looks to Finland as a good example. "Every lecturer there is highly qualified, which is how they assure the quality of their credentials. Moreover, anyone who wants to learn something has access to educational offerings. There are also special centres where you can learn vocational skills and competencies."

The future of micro-credentials

"We have to move forward with this, because if public educational institutions don't do it, other, big commercial companies are ready to step in," says Scilla. "Furthermore, for short courses to be successful, they have to be a perfect match with demand. And developing demand-driven education is an extremely complicated endeavour." She sees many opportunities for open education across borders. "Advancements in hydrogen technology, for example, require new actions and new specialists; let's not invent everything ourselves in each country but work together on education that is accessible to everyone in Europe. Only then will we truly accelerate the innovation cycle."

"Mutual recognition and acknowledgement of bachelor's and master's degrees is incredibly practical in Europe. You want to be able to organise that for smaller educational units as well," says Paul. "We see a lot of opportunities emerging for citizens and for mobility. You want to get to a situation where you know what a micro-credential held by, say a nurse from France who is allowed to perform a certain procedure, is worth and how we can weigh and assess that. You can then use such a credential, for example, to get an exemption in a diploma-based programme or when applying for a job."

This will require even greater international cooperation. European initiatives such as pilots and projects in which several member states work together on micro-credentials herald the next phase of this success story in the making. 🌱

Micro-credentials pilot two years on - a dance between structure and freedom



With the micro-credentials pilot coming to an end, it is time to reflect on the past period. Sitting at my desk, the rain on the window setting a somewhat melancholy mood, I think back on the pilot with a sense of pride and gratitude. What we have achieved with the participating institutions in these two years is quite remarkable. It was a special time. It feels a bit like we have learned to dance together.

At first, the dance was still a bit formal, like an English Waltz perhaps. The requests for explanations and clarity from the participating institutions seemed almost unending. At the same time, everyone was keen to experiment and learn. This delicate dance between structure and freedom was immensely valuable, and I think we found a good balance together. A balance in which we embraced different approaches within the participating institutions, but always with a shared commitment regarding agreements on quality assurance of the micro-credentials.

Like dance partners who have to get to know each other, we had to learn to speak each other's language at the beginning. But as time went by, mutual trust grew and we became increasingly attuned to each other. Although much of the real work takes place in the institutions, a sense of community and connection emerged. This became apparent through the learning communities, peer reviews and many exchanges between institutions. The pilot proved that the power of joint efforts is not only more efficient, but it is also a source of enrichment and inspiration.

In a dance, a misstep is not a failure but an invitation to explore new possibilities. Authenticity, being honest and being allowed to make mistakes are values I cherish. The pilot confirmed this for me once again. Within the institutions, not only has there been experimentation but also learning by doing.



Discussing challenges and daring to ask questions proved to be driving forces behind our collective learning process.

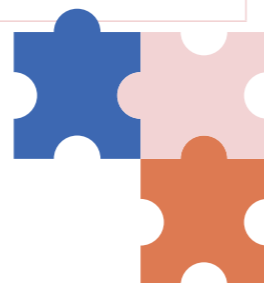
And then there are the proud moments we experienced in the pilot. We are seeing more and more micro-credentials in the Netherlands – tangible evidence of our collective impact on lifelong learning. The follow-up of this pilot, where we continue to work on micro-credentials together, promises to propel this development even further. It is a testament to the shared commitment of all those innovators in the participating institutions who, together, represent an ever-growing community dedicated to micro-credentials in the Netherlands.

Let us be proud of this journey, of the obstacles we have overcome and the lessons we have learned. Let's keep dancing together, with the same energy and commitment, and keep building a future of continuous development and lifelong learning together!

Bart Lamboo,
project leader micro-credentials universities
of applied sciences and research universities

Glossary

| Term | Definition |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Micro-credentials | A micro-credential is a reliable certificate that allows learners to demonstrate what they know, can do and understand after successful completion of an educational unit. In other words, a micro-credential gives independent value to a smaller educational unit. A micro-credential is not just about the end result, however. It is the entire process, including the learning activities and associated assessment of learning outcomes, which gives value to a micro-credential, which is recognised inside and outside educational institutions. |
| Edubadges | SURF edubadges is the national platform for digital certificates in the Dutch tertiary education system. All digital certificates issued on the edubadges platform are called edubadges. Edubadges is therefore a collective name for several variants of digital certificates, which can be issued through the edubadges service. |
| Lifelong Learning | With the Lifelong Learning (LLL) approach, the government aims to achieve a breakthrough in lifelong learning in the Netherlands as a whole and to create a positive and robust learning culture. Encouraging people to take ownership of their careers so that they continue to develop and this development matches evolving labour market demand is at the heart of the LLA (Source: NRO). People in employment can upskill, retrain and participate in a variety of offers, even after their initial qualification. |
| Learner | Both the initial student (within the meaning of the law) and the lifelong learner (professional). |
| Lifelong learner/Professional | A person who enrolls for educational offerings in the context of lifelong learning (i.e. not as a student within the meaning of the law). |
| Student within the meaning of the law | A student enrolled in a diploma-oriented programme at a vocational training school covered by the Dutch Education and Vocational Training Act or a student enrolled at a university of applied sciences or a research university covered by the Dutch Higher Education and Scientific Research Act, who is following education at statutory tuition fees. |



Colophon

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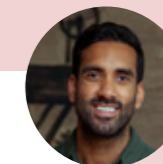
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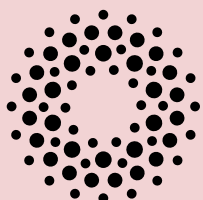
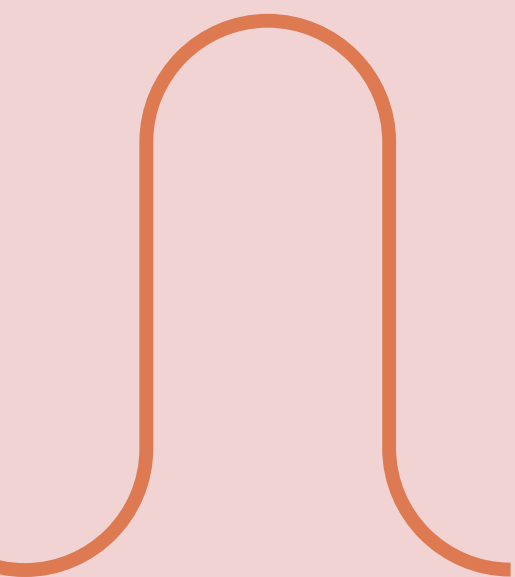
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