

Application, quality assurance and recognition of micro-credentials

Presentation to Cedefop
Peter Cullen 22.10.2025

Breakout session 3 – Global credentials: making microcredentials
recognisable and portable will focus on inconsistencies in the recognition and
portability of microcredentials across sectors and borders.

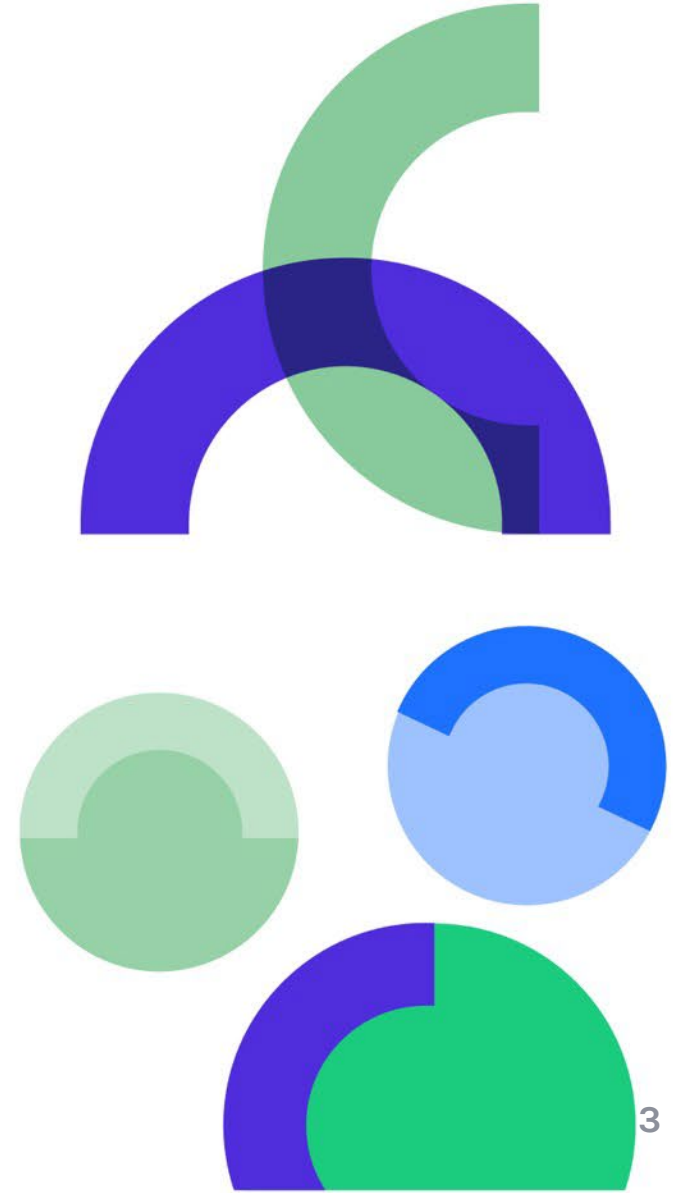


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What are micro-credentials?

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- Council of the European Union definition: *“Micro-credential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. [...]”*
- They can be regarded as qualifications: *“... the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.”* (This definition is from CEU Recommendation on the EQF 2017.)
- The term can also be used to refer to the courses that lead to micro-credentials
- They are often seen as complementing major qualifications rather than completely replacing them
- Ireland has had long and widespread experience with qualifications that follow formal educational or training programmes that can be seen as micro-credentials in FET and HE



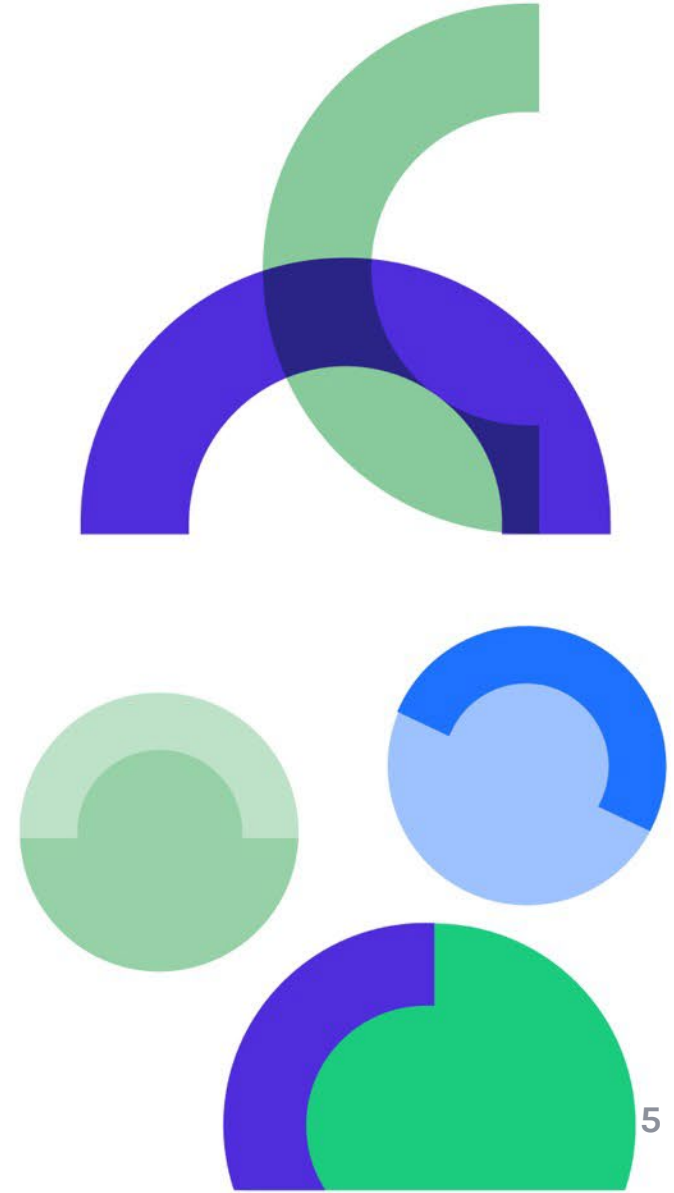
Drivers, enablers, risks and opportunities



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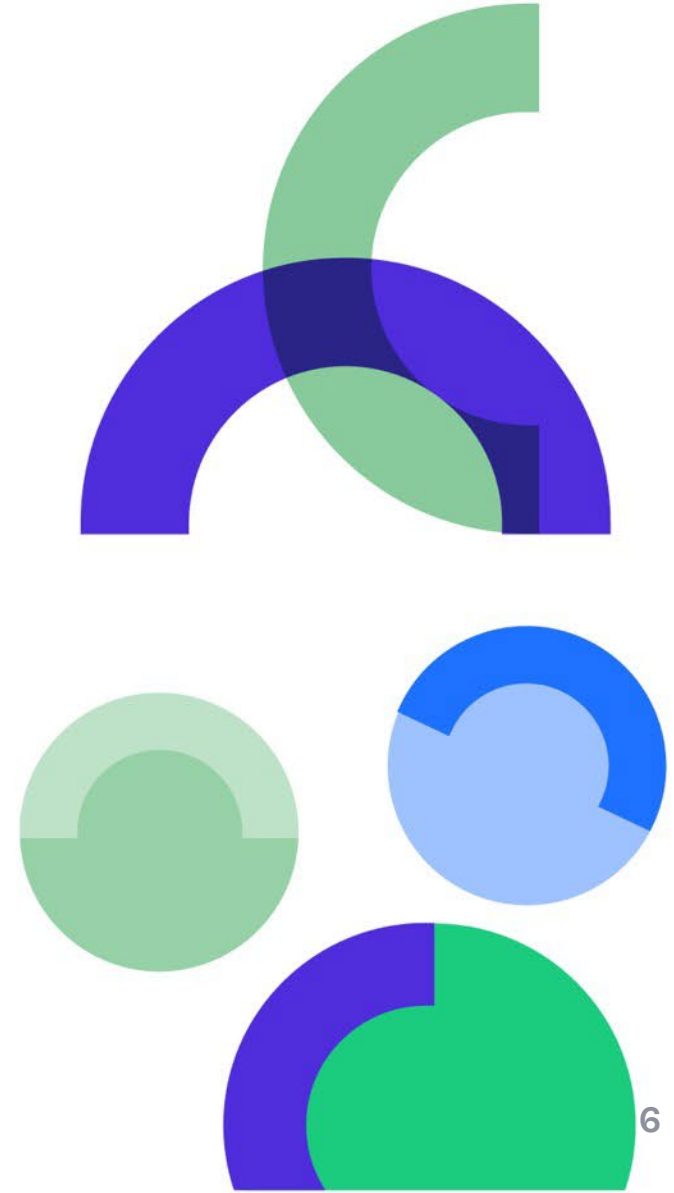
Possible drivers

- Upskilling and re-skilling to adapt to rapidly changing workforce needs
- Skills-based hiring
- Professional, occupational or regulatory usages e.g. CPD
- Non-traditional qualification awarding bodies
- Unbundling traditional curricula
- Learn as you earn approaches to managing the high cost of education
- Refocussing of MOOCs
- Motivating learners by piecewise recognition of progress
- New revenue for HEIs and a channel to enrolment on full degrees
- RPL
- Credentialism



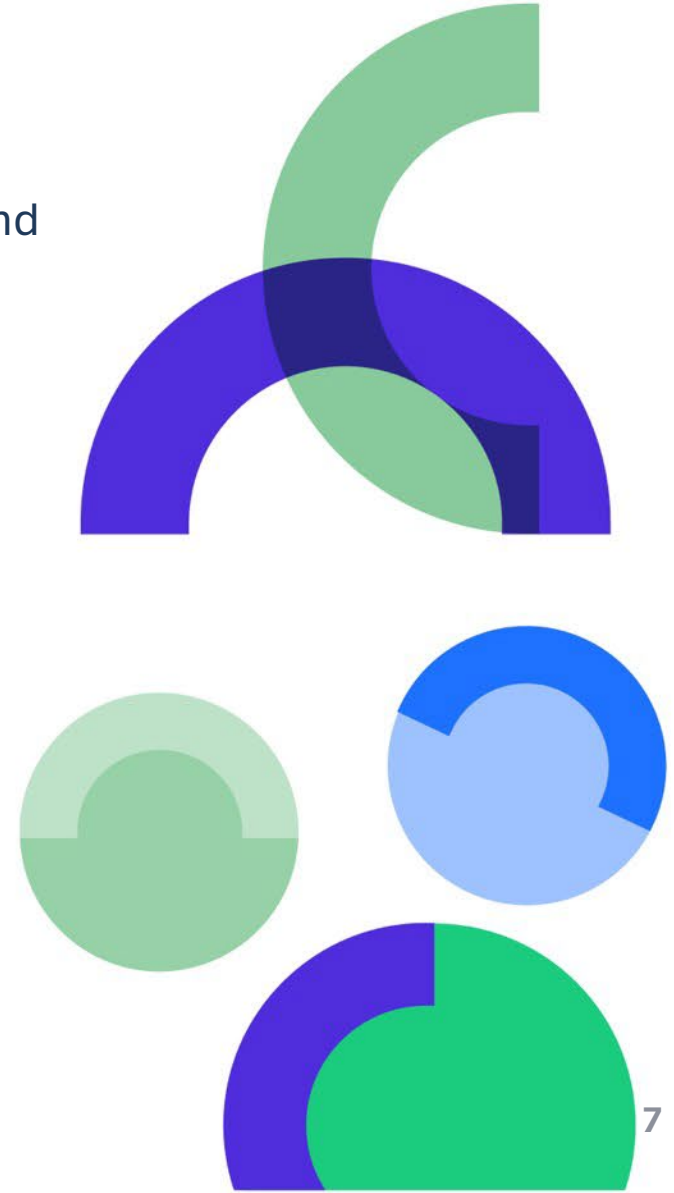
Enablers

- Quality assurance infrastructure (institutional or programme-level QA processes)
- Qualifications infrastructure (In Ireland NFQ, digital credentials systems, IRQ, credit and credit accumulation systems, standards)
- Modularisation
- EU and Bologna infrastructure (facilitating international recognition and peer learning)
- Recognition of learning for access purposes, exemption or advanced entry (RPL)
- ICT (for managing complex portfolios of qualifications)



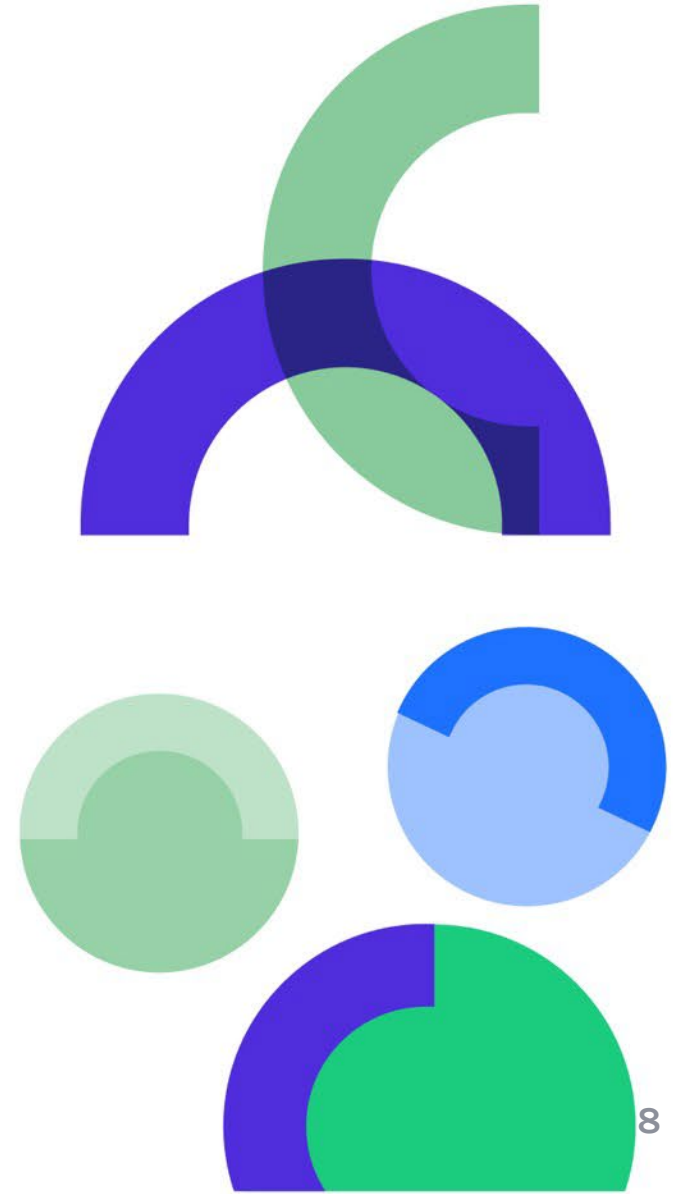
Risks

- High expectations regarding agility may lead to compromises (tension between responsiveness and quality)
- In HE existing QA infrastructure is perhaps oriented towards larger qualifications and programmes
- Trust takes time to establish
- Complexity
- Lack of clarity about what micro-credentials are, and what they can be used for
- Assuming it is possible to apply one-size-fits-all approaches
- Over-promising stackability
- Early exits from education
- Unbundling can make achievement of some ILOs more challenging
- Following the crowd without having a clear rationale
- Insufficient coordination may reduce the coherence of the qualifications system
- Credentialism leading to drain on resources



Opportunities

- Rethinking the certification of small-volume learning achievements
- Can support lifelong learning
- Can motivate useful change in qualifications systems



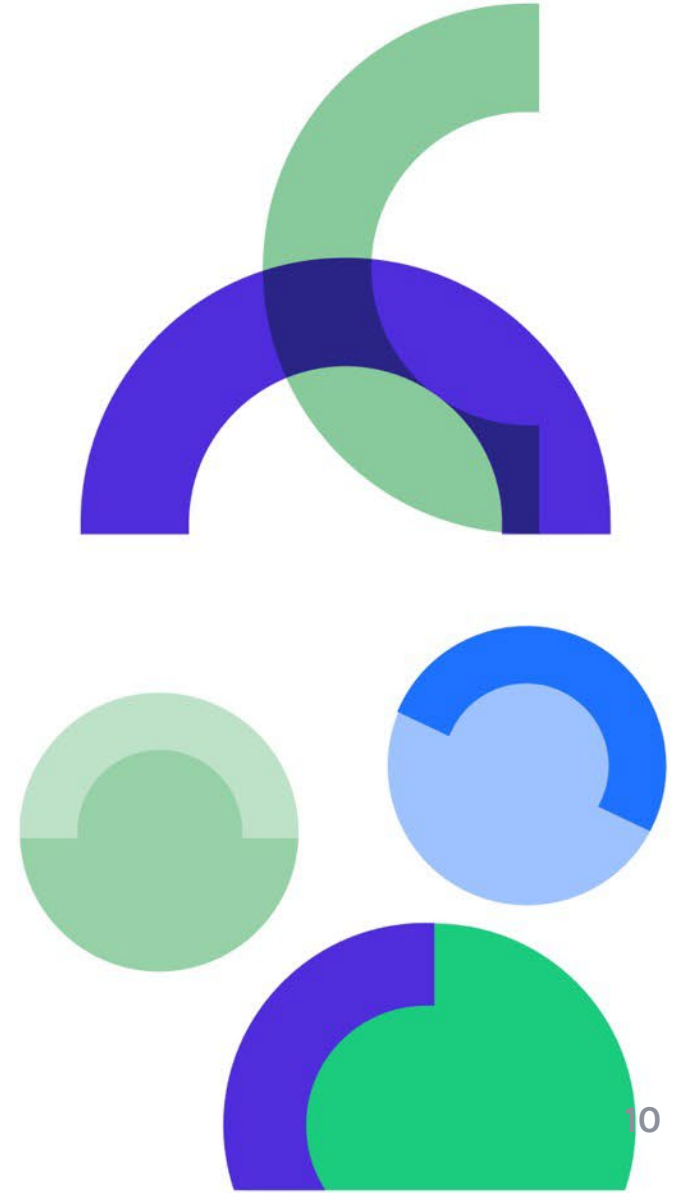
Characterisation and recognition



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Characterisation and recognition

- Qualification
 - Intended learning outcomes
 - Purpose
 - NFQ level (if applicable)
 - Inclusion in a national qualifications database (e.g. IRQ in Ireland)
 - Awarding body
 - ...
- Short course that leads to the qualification
 - Assumed prior learning (what the MC course is intended to build on)
 - Credit
 - Curriculum
 - Assessment
 - Quality assurance
 - Provider
 - ...
- See Appendix 1 of the QQI Green Paper for more details



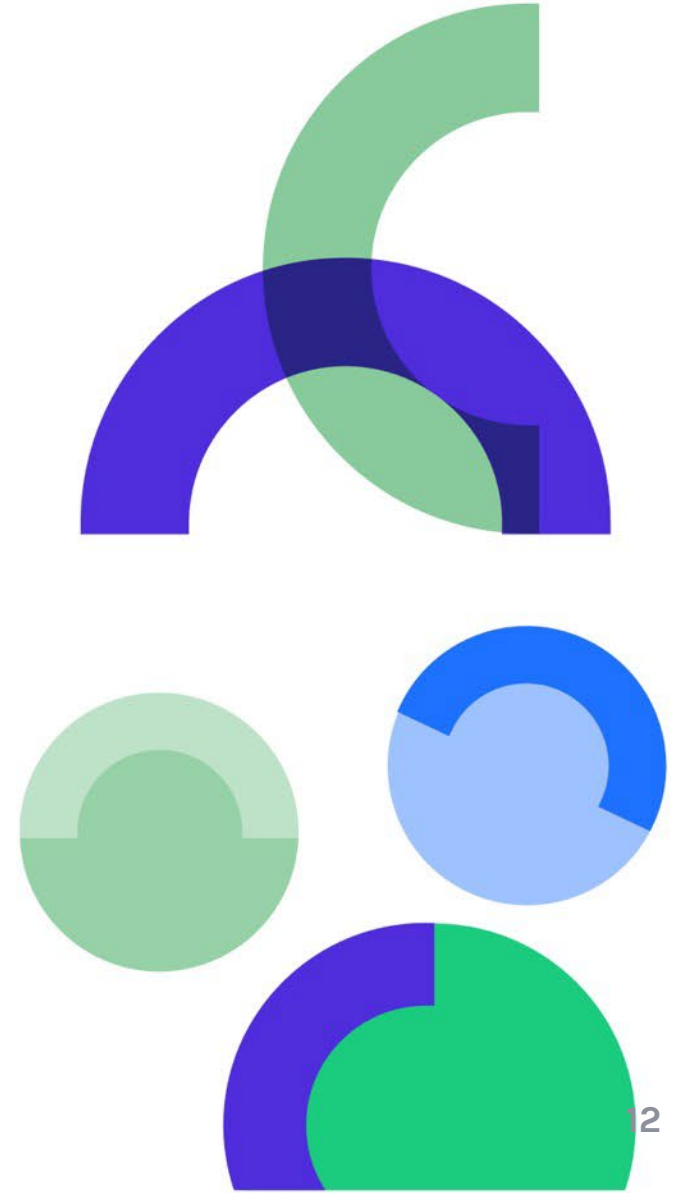
Policy issues



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MCs are a heterogeneous set

- The EU definition of MCs focusses on their size
- Size alone is not sufficient to determine what level of QA is appropriate for a short course, other factors that may influence the complexity of QA include, for example,
 - Expected interoperability with other programmes and qualifications (stackability, recognition, purpose)
 - Access and assumed prior learning (highly specific vs broadly inclusive)
 - Learning environment
 - Provider experience
 - Risk (what is the risk of a false-positive assessment of the achievement of the ILO)
- Similar issues arise when considering whether a specific MC needs to be included in a qualifications framework



Green paper sets out a range of questions



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Green paper discussion topics

- Experience to date in Ireland
- Stackable micro-credentials
- What does the label micro-credential signify?
- Micro-credentials and the NFQ
- Titling NFQ micro-credentials
- Credit
- Unbundling education
- Quality assurance
- Micro-credentials outside the NFQ
- Data on the supply of micro-credentials
- Digital certification
- See <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2025-07/qqi-green-paper-on-micro-credentials.pdf> for details

