# I'MINQA

Feasibility assessment on the establishment of quality label for all providers that operate in alignment with the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability

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Prepared as part of the IMINQA project

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# Introduction

The feasibility assessment on the establishment of a quality label for providers that operate in alignment with the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability[1] is implemented as part of the project "Implementation and Innovation in QA through peer learning (IMINQA[2]". IMINQA addresses the quality assurance of Micro-credentials, the quality assurance of European Universities and the digitalisation of quality assurance procedures and processes, to support the Thematic Peer Group on Quality Assurance (i.e. the TPG C) and contribute to the overall work of Bologna Follow Up Group.

Building on the outcomes of the MICROBOL project (2019-2021)[3], IMINQA aims to address the trust in providers and simplify the recognition of micro-credentials (further: MCs)[4], through the development of practical tools, such as the section for certified micro-credentials and providers in the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR)[5].

The study aims to explore the viability of a quality label for providers working in alignment with the principles outlined in the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability (Annex 2), and explores its added value as well as the potential models of implementation. As the study will further demonstrate, there are already several actors and organisations in the European Higher Education Area (further: EHEA) that issue labels awarded to providers in higher education, upon their fulfilment of (different) sets of standards. This study explores whether there is a need for a new label that would serve as an anchoring quality standard recognised by all stakeholders in EHEA.

The study is explorative in nature and aims to outline the advantages and disadvantages of establishing a new label. In order to achieve this, the study first examines the current landscape of quality labels (seals, marks, signs etc.) in the EHEA, with a focus on labels awarded based on methodologies aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (further: ESG)[6] and applied by EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies. In addition, it explores the perceptions of two key groups of stakeholders - alternative providers and quality assurance agencies - assessing the need for creating a new quality label and the models of its implementation (i.e. the potential awarding body and the object of labelling). Finally, the study gives an overview of the main conclusions from the interviews, analyses potential models of awarding a label signalling alignment with the principles of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability and summarises points of attention regarding each of them.

Following the remit of the work of EQAR and the scope of the project, the study focuses on micro-credentials at higher education level (i.e. QF EHEA level (5) 6-8). It also primarily looks into the quality assurance principle of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability. Last but not least, the study emphasises the perspectives of entities and organisations without degree-awarding powers (commonly referred to as alternative providers), rather than higher education institutions, as the former group's views are often overlooked in research on micro-credentials.

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[1] See more: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials

[2] More about the project: https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/iminqa/

[3] Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments: Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA. See more: https://microcredentials.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/03/Micro-credentials_Framework_final-1.pdf

[4] See Glossary for further terminology

[5] The section on certified micro-credentials and other providers in DEQAR is available at the following link

[6] The ESGs are used as a reference point of a widely accepted and practised quality assurance framework in the EHEA. The use of the ESG is also encouraged by the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability

This paper represents a collaborative effort of the Working Group on QA of Micro-Credentials of the IMINQA project. Working group members were invited to participate by designating a representative from their countries and organisations. The following members were included: Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium/Flemish Community, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, EQAR, ESU, EUA, European Commission, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Malta, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, UK/Scotland. Throughout the period of 2022-2024, the group had six meetings where different aspects of QA of micro-credentials were discussed.

# 1. Context

In response to the demand for more adaptable, learner-centred methods of delivering education and training, short learning courses (i.e. micro-credentials) and other non-traditional credentials are being rapidly developed in Europe and around the world by a wide range of public and private providers (European Commission, 2020[7]; OECD,2023)[8].

The growing offer of micro-credentials and other alternative credentials also brought up the question of their value, as well as the trust and recognition of their learning outcomes, especially when offered by non-traditional higher education providers that are not well-known by the public. CEDEFOP (2023), for example, finds that brand reputation and trust are linked - when micro-credentials are granted by providers who are notrenowned, not officially recognised by national authorities, or not based on industry standards, trust is typically low.[9]

According to Resei et al. (2019)[10], users - including learners and employers- will be better able to build trust and recognise the value of micro-credentials with greater standardisation, awareness, and familiarity in these programmes. CEDEFOP (2023), finds that learners are searching for a quality label of some kind to help them make decisions, and there are instances where provider partnerships generated a quality label to establish a standard framework that guarantees uniformity in programme designs[11].

On the other hand, despite the fact that quality labels are intended to assist learners to assess the quality of the educational offers, the variety of providers' approaches to quality standards may unintentionally exacerbate uncertainty and a feeling of confusion, especially if the learners do not know whether and why one label is more trustworthy or meaningful than another. In addition, using ambiguous or overly general terminology on the label (e.g. "European"), can make it challenging for the learners to comprehend the precise features the educational offer; learners could be left wondering how various programmes with the same label genuinely compare if there are no clear or known quality criteria supporting the label.

## 1.1 About quality labels in higher education

Quality labels are awarded as confirmation of compliance with certain standards or demonstrated excellence in a specific area or dimension. They are utilised in many industries, such as food production, construction and technology sectors, as they typically focus on quality, safety, and performance and are

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[7] Explore more here: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/30863

[8] Learn more at: https://doi.org/10.1787/9c4b7b68-en

[9] See full publication at: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/141643

[10] For full report, please visit: https://www.corship.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Corship-R1.1c_micro-credentials.pdf

[11] Growing demand for certified quality products is also noted in other sectors such as food production (Fotopoulos and Athanasios, 2001)

mostly visible in the products offered. A quality label can sometimes be mistaken for a logo, however, a logo is merely a visual symbol, while a label provides information about a product or a service.[12]

In higher education, just like in other sectors, one of a labels' major roles is to indicate compliance with certain (quality) standards. In this regard, labels can encourage a culture of (continuous) improvement within higher educational institutions.

The practical use of quality labels in higher education, however, has not been prominently explored in previous studies. The scarce information demonstrates that a few organisations and structures working in the field of higher education in Europe issue labels following their own standards. A brief overview of the organisations' handbooks shows that labels' standards also include sections on internal and external quality assurance processes undertaken by the providers. In some cases, (e.g. the EIT Label by the European Institute for Innovation and Technology), the standards explicitly refer to the ESGs, while others (e.g. the OpenupEd Quality Label by European Association of Distance Teaching Universities) approach the matter broadly and inquire whether the provider complies with domestic and international quality assurance requirements. Most of the label awarding processes are based on external peer review (e.g. the IREG Approved Label by the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence), as opposed to self - assessment and awarding (E-xcellence Label by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities).  One model that excludes external peer review (and site visits) is the one in which labels are awarded after verifying that all conditions are met by the awarding body itself  (e.g. ECTS label by the European Commission).

Labels directly aimed at short provisions are a relatively new occurrence in the EHEA. One such example is the Micro-credential label presented on the digital certificates and edubadges awarded to higher education institutions taking part in the (ongoing) national Pilot Microcredentials in Higher Education in Netherlands[13]. The catalogue of all micro-credentials involved in the pilot project and the label are publicly available on the Edubadges service website[14], and further information on the quality framework (including the ESG related requirements) used is presented per programme. Another example, is the EUTOPIA label[15] issued by higher education institutions taking part in the European University Alliance EUTOPIA to short courses developed jointly within the alliance.

While any entity can create its own label following a self-established QA process, its success depends on several inter-related factors, including international recognition of the label and the issuer, the demand from higher education institutions based on the added value that the label brings about, the familiarity/popularity of the issuing organisation etc. (CEDEFOP, 2023).

Chaparro et al. (2019) explore the use of EUR – ACE label by 163 engineering higher education institutions in France and find that institutions mainly use the seal as a positional and competitive tool. The study finds that label utilisation can also involve ethical and other intrinsic motivations, such as demonstration of commitment to  respecting the environment or the Sustainable Development Goals (i.e. the SDGs).

Issuing the label also brings up the issue of falsification and misuse; however, there are ways to prevent the risks of duplication or falsification, such as issuing the label with a digitally signed form or in other forms of verifiable digital representation[16].

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[12] See more at: https://www.fooddrinkeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/06672-Guidelines-on-Legibility-of-Labelling_45.pdf
[13] More on the national Pilot Microcredentials in Higher Education in Netherlands here: https://www.versnellingsplan.nl/en/Kennisbank/pilot-microcredentials-2/
[14] See more at: https://edubadges.nl/catalog
[15] See more: https://www.eua.eu/images/publications/Conference_papers/P3%20Angouri_SJegers_Szabo%20PPT.pdf
[16] European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). (2020). *DEQAR Label: Scope and Use*. [Internal document]

## 1.2 About the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability

In 2022, the Council of European Union adopted the Recommendation to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability. The document proposes a definition, standard elements for describing micro-credentials (Annex 1 of the Recommendation), and principles for designing and issuing micro-credentials (Annex 2 of the Recommendation).

The aim of the Recommendation is to increase the trust in micro-credentials across Europe by proposing a common framework for creating, applying, and comparing across borders, sectors, and domains in a cohesive manner across Member States, stakeholders, and various providers (ranging from for-profit businesses to educational and training institutions).

Quality assurance is the first principle in the design process of micro–credentials; programmes are expected to be subjected to internal and external quality assurance procedures, aligned with the ESG (whenever possible). Other principles in the design process include the following:

- Transparency: All relevant information, such as learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and qualification levels, should be clear and easily understandable.

- Relevance: The design of micro-credentials must focus on addressing specific labour market, societal, or personal needs, making them applicable and useful for learners and employers.

- Recognition: Micro-credentials should be recognised across different sectors and borders, facilitating their use in both education and employment contexts.

- Learning Outcomes: Each micro-credential must clearly define the learning outcomes that the learner has achieved.

- Assessment: Valid and reliable assessment methods should be used to verify that the learner has met the stated outcomes.

- Portability: Micro-credentials should be designed so that learners can easily store, share, and use them across different systems and regions.

- Learner-Centeredness: Micro-credentials must be flexible and focused on the learner's needs, allowing them to tailor their education to personal and professional goals.

- Stackability: Micro-credentials should allow learners to combine them progressively to build up more comprehensive qualifications over time.

- Inclusion and Accessibility: Micro-credentials should be designed to be accessible to a wide range of learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, promoting equality of access to education and training.

The use of other tools, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) for expressing the workload, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for marking the level of the learning outcomes and the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) for increasing the transparency, is encouraged.

The Recommendation recognises a wide variety of providers of micro-credentials', including education and training institutions and organisations, organisations representing workers and employers, employers and industry, civil society organisations, public employment services (PES) and regional and national authorities, and other types of actors designing, delivering and issuing micro-credentials for formal, non-formal and informal learning. The choice of interviewees in this study aimed to resemble the diversity of entities compiled by the Recommendation.

# 2. Research design and data collection

The present study applies a mixed-methods approach, integrating a desk-study, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to explore the feasibility of quality labels for micro-credentials.

First, in order to explore the status quo of quality labels using the quality framework promoted by the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability (i.e. the ESG), a desk study compiling a list of labels issued by EQAR-registered agencies was conducted. Information was systemically collected from websites of 56 QA agencies and DEQAR during the period February-March 2024, to gain insights into the types of labels and awarding conditions.

Second, the experiences and opinions of QA agencies were garnered via two focus groups as part of breakout sessions at the ENQA Members Forum in 2024, including 40 quality assurance agencies in total. In addition, the opinions of the participants, including QA agencies, of the IMINQA work group for Micro-credentials were compiled at the meetings in January and April, 2024.

The aim of the focus group was on the hand hand, to explore, the experiences of EQAR-registered agencies with issuing labels which are aligned with a common framework (i.e. the ESG), and on the other hand, to outline their views on creating a label for providers of micro-credentials and possible implementation scenarios. The semi-structured focus group interviews homed in on two main research questions:

a) What is the added value of creating a quality label for providers of micro-credentials? and

b) What is the best model/scenario for implementing the quality label regarding

b1) The object of the label: a single micro-credential or a provider
b2) The awarder: public authority (e.g. Ministry responsible for education or labour matters, service for employment and vocational training. etc.), field specific body (e.g. domain specific regulatory body, national association of field professionals), quality assurance agency and/or European wide organisation/entity (e.g. the European Commission).

The focus groups also explored additional subjects related to the expectations on establishing the label.

Third the semi-structured interviews with alternative education providers were conducted. The interviews aimed to probe the providers' perception on establishing a quality label for all providers that operate in alignment with the European Approach to Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability and were conducted remotely, each lasting approximately 35 minutes.

This stage of the study included several steps to identify and engage with participants effectively. The initial step involved inviting alternative providers listed by four EQAR-registered agencies testing the extension of the Database for External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) with information on alternative providers and micro-credentials. Additionally, to broaden the scope and enhance the diversity of participants regarding types of entities and geographical distribution, providers were selected from national repositories whenever possible. During this phase, over 40 invitations had been sent to providers meeting the selection criteria in June and August 2024. Finally, due to a low response rate, snowball sampling was employed to expand the participants' pool; providers already engaged in the study were asked to recommend other organisations who met the criteria.

Ultimately, interviews were successfully conducted with five alternative providers and platforms offering short courses in Belgium (the Flemish community), Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan, and the USA (see more information in Annex 3) between July and September 2024. Given the wide range of alternative providers, each with unique goals, scopes, and purposes, the study incorporated perspectives from entities with and without experience with ESG aligned quality assurance. On the latter, three of the providers had their micro-credential programmes certified by an EQAR - registered agency, while the other two did not have experience with a review following the ESG.

## 2.1 Quality labels issued by EQAR-registered agencies

To explore the current status quo regarding existing quality labels in higher education that adhere to the quality framework endorsed by the European Approach to Micro-Credentials (i.e. the ESGs), a desk study on quality labels issued by EQAR-registered agencies was implemented. These quality labels use common peer-review principles and the methodologies are enlisted in EQAR.

The observations demonstrated that depending on who creates the label, two types of labels are issued by the EQAR-registered agencies:

a) labels established by other organisations and implemented by EQAR-registered agencies

b) labels created and implemented by QA agencies themselves

### 2.1.a. ESG aligned labels established by other organisations and issued by EQAR registered agencies

The analysis revealed that altogether, five quality labels that are aligned with the ESGs, established by various organisations, are currently implemented by EQAR-registered agencies. Overall, fifteen EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies issue such labels, with some labels being awarded by a greater number of agencies than others—for instance, the CeQuint label is granted by nine EQAR-registered agencies.

In a similar fashion, some EQAR-registered agencies are more active in issuing labels created by other organisations than others (e.g. the Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Mathematics (ASIIN) and National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA) are authorised to issue most of the quality labels aligned with the ESG of other organisations).

Most of the quality labels established by associations and umbrella organisations are subject-specific. Examples include the Eurolabel Chemistry Quality Label, Euro-Inf Quality Label, EUR-ACE and EQAS Food label (see Annex 1 for full list). This means that the labels are mainly awarded to domain specific programmes (e.g. engineering, food production and technology etc.).

The Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation (CeQuInt) label, on the other hand, is an internationalisation platform offering both higher education institutions and programmes assessments of quality of internationalisation.

Two major awarding models are prevalent: quality labels can be awarded either by the organisation itself or through an authorised QA agency. For example, the Eurolabel Chemistry Quality Label can be obtained by the organisation for a regular fee or with a reduced fee should the institution have already been reviewed by an EQAR - registered agency.

Other labels can be awarded only via authorised QA agencies (e.g. EUR-ACE and CeQuINT).

One exception is the EQAS Food label, which is implemented in sole partnership of ISEKI-Food Association and ASIIN.

An overview of the websites of the awarding organisations demonstrated that the lists of authorised QA agencies and accreditation centres are usually publicly listed. External evaluations and issued labels are maintained in the repository and are publicly accessible to everyone[17].

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[17] For example, the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education uses open repository listing EUR-ACE labelled engineering degree programs programmes available here: https://eurace.enaee.eu/node/163. Repositories are also used for CeQuInt label (see: https://cequint.eu/awarded-certificates/), Eurolabel Chemistry Label (see: https://ectn.eu/committees/label/awards/) and Euro-Inf label (see: https://eqanie.eu/quality-label/accredited-

## 2.1.b. Labels created and issued by QA agencies

Findings indicate that 15 EQAR-registered agencies issue their own quality label(s) following some of their ESG-aligned methodologies. Altogether, 29 distinct labels were identified (see Annex 2 for full list). In a similar manner as the labels created by other organisations, some agencies are more active in issuing labels than others. For example, the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU) awards 6 different kind of labels.

Some of the labels are granted after a successful external review, while others go beyond fulfilling the standards and are granted as a sign of excellence. Quality labels are also distinguished by their scopes and objectives of implementation. Labels can be awarded to individual programmes and/or to higher education institutions.

Some examples of quality labels issued by EQAR registered agencies are outlined below:

- The Estonian Quality Assurance Agency for Education (HAKA) awards a Digital Education Quality Label to online and blended learning providers in Estonia. The label for e-courses acknowledges successful employment of digital technology by designers and teachers. Courses that demonstrate excellence in applying digital technologies in teaching and learning may be awarded the Excellence in Digital Education label. HAKA provides the opportunity to professors to assess the compliance of their e-course with the quality criteria and apply for the e-course quality label directly on the agency's website[18].

- The Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (ACPUA) through the ALCAEUS project, awards a label under the same name. The label "*makes connections between the Institutional Evaluation and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)*" and is awarded after assessing the degree of commitment to SDG in faculties/schools, universities and research centres.

The desk study detected two labels targeting continuing education programmes in particular. Further details are outlined below:

- The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya) has established quality labels awarded following ESG aligned reviews, including short learning courses (micro-credentials). The label is awarded to programmes offered by higher education institutions[19]. Each quality label includes a registration number and comes with a corresponding certificate. AQU Catalunya has published a guidebook outlining the visual details, conditions of use of the labels, including the one applicable to short learning courses, and the certificates of use.[20]

- The Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) also incorporated quality labels in most of its ESG aligned activities. FIBAA's Seal for certified continuing education courses is awarded to programmes offered both by higher education institutions and alternative providers. The agency's Premium Seal for certified continuing education courses demonstrates that the programme not only complies, but exceeds the quality standards. FIBAA publishes Principles for the Award of the FIBAA Premium Seal for Certification, including the procedure and the criteria for obtaining the label of excellence.[21]

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programmes/)and ISEKI-food label (see: https://www.iseki-food.net/accreditation/accredited_degree_programmes)
[18] See more: https://forms.zohopublic.eu/ekka/form/Ekursuseeneseanals/formperma/vn_xcxR5oyDB6vvLJWKi3cAzNIFbx-VTjBUzKFUhEyw?zf_lang=en
[19] At the given time, the remit of the Spanish QA agencies is limited to accrediting and certifying programs offered by higher education institutions only
[20] Positioning of AQU Catalunya regarding subject-specific quality labels. In https://www.aqu.cat/en/doc/Universitats/Metodologia/Posicionament-d-AQU-Catalunya-respecte-dels-segells-tema-tics-de-qualitat-labels-EN

Other program targeted labels by EQAR-registered agencies could also be applicable to micro-credentials. Their awarding, however, as will be discussed later, may be conditioned by different factors, such as the remit of work of the agency.

# 3. Exploring Stakeholders' Perceptions

In order to explore stakeholders' perceptions towards a label signalling alignment with the principles of the European approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability, focus group discussions with QA agencies and individual interviews with alternative providers were conducted.

The analysis that follows outlines the experiences and reflections of approximately 40 EQAR- registered agencies, and the input and positions of five alternative providers and platforms for short learning programmes.

## 3.1 Focus group discussion with Quality Assurance Agencies

The aim of the focus group was to explore, on the one hand, the experiences of EQAR-registered agencies with issuing labels which are aligned with common quality standards (i.e. the ESG), and on the another hand, their views on creating a label for providers of micro-credentials and possible implementation scenarios (including the object of the label and the awarding organisation).

The participants in the focus groups represented QA agencies with and without experience in issuing quality labels, allowing for exploration of a diverse range of opinions. The results also incorporate reflections of QA agencies gathered through the IMINQA Working group meetings in 2023 and 2024.

The analysis of focus group discussions yielded several important findings that reflect the participants' perceptions towards quality labels and in general, quality assurance issues of alternative providers and micro-credentials.

**Added value of creating a quality label**

Participants emphasised credibility, integrity, and trust as major advantages of implementing quality labels for micro-credentials. Quality labels provide benefits for providers by enhancing their credibility, particularly when the label is recognised on a national and European level.

For some of the participants, a quality label also ensures that reliable information is stored, made publicly available, and represents a benchmark for other programmes. Furthermore, participants noted that labels are useful for providers to position themselves in the domestic and international markets.

When discussing the regulations for issuing quality labels in a national context, the participants did not outline particular obstacles[22].

On the other hand, the need for a new quality label was questioned by some of the participants. Several opinions were shared. First, due to their strong labour market connection, micro-credential programmes evolve at a rapid pace. In this regard, what has been labelled at a particular time, may change by the next learning cycle making the label obsolete. Second, the process of issuing and managing a label can be time-consuming. As an example, one representative of a QA agency that awards quality labels, explained the challenge of following up with all accredited institutions using the label on their websites after the expiration of their accreditation. In addition to this, ensuring that the label is used properly and preventing misuses were as well highlighted as challenges. Third, in some systems, higher education institutions include the logo of the QA agency accrediting their work and post

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[21] FIBAA Quality Seal for continuing education courses. In
https://www.fibaa.org/en/accreditation-certification/certification-of-continuing-education-courses/quality-seal/
[22] This could be explained by the fact that this area is beyond the domain of work and expertise of the particular participants at the focus group sessions

the accreditation certificates on their websites. In this regard, the QA agency's logo could already be understood as a label that guarantees quality and reliability. Fourth, the success of the label depends on whether "*a considerate mass of institutions pick up on it*" (as expressed by one participant in the IMINQA Working Group).

The issue of possible stratification caused by quality labels was also brought to attention. Some participants noted that if the label is applicable only to a certain group of institutions or is associated with additional fees, it might put labelled higher education providers in an advantageous position in comparison to other education providers, potentially leading to unfair competition among them.

### Scenarios on implementing the quality label

Possible scenarios for implementing the quality label were proposed to participants including the object of the label (i.e. micro-credential and/or provider) and the awarding body (i.e. public authority, field specific body, quality assurance agency, European based entity/organisation).

Regarding the object of the label, participants unequivocally agreed that labels should be granted to the provider and not to a single micro-credential. QA agencies found that an accreditation and certification per micro-credential could be challenging as it demands a high workload for short courses, both for the reviewing QA agency and the provider.

Regarding the awarder of the label, most of the participants in the focus group agreed that labels should be issued by QA agencies, but they could also be done in partnership with professional bodies or associations. Participants pointed out that it could be costly for professional bodies or other organisations that do not have prior experience in conducting quality assurance reviews as described in the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability, to advance in this field without collaboration with EQAR-registered QA agencies.

Throughout the discussions, representatives of QA agencies highlighted that their higher education systems did not single out micro-credentials as program types nor recognised alternative providers as higher education providers. In addition, they noted that in some of the national systems, the current quality assurance schemes aimed at higher education providers did not apply to short learning programmes and alternative providers. Consequently, some of the EQAR-registered agencies did not have competences in reviewing and certifying micro-credentials. They noted that a label aligned with the principles of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability would therefore hold limited relevance within some of the EHEA systems.

## 3.2 Interviews with alternative providers

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with five alternative providers and platforms of short courses from Belgium – the Flemish community, Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan and the USA (see more information in Annex 3).

The analysis of the interviews reveals several key themes highlighting providers' perceptions and views on implementing the label, and also explore their views on external quality assurance.

### Added value of creating a quality label

In general, interviewees, irrespective of whether or not they had experience with external ESG-aligned reviews, had a positive view on utilising a label following a commonly agreed European quality framework[23]. Overall, they found that this would ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of their education offers. For the ones having experience with an ESG–aligned external review, the creation of a

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[23] It should be noted that, however, the interviewees had often no knowledge of the European approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability per se, but rather some of the principles (such as Recognition, Validation of non-formal and informal learning, Stackability, Quality) and frameworks promoted by it (such as ECTS, QF EHEA levels, ESGs).

quality label was perceived as an additional, supporting tool of presenting outcomes of an external review.

The use of a label signalling compliance with the quality principle of the European approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability was seen as an important tool for attracting learners and serving as a marketing instrument in a competing market. For example, one interviewee, representing a company offering courses at national level, explained that a quality label that is recognised at a European level could help the provider expand its international portfolio and attract learners from other higher education systems.

Most of the interviewees anticipated that the label would increase the demand on their offerings. However, one of the participants noted that while a European quality label is important, it might not have a significant impact if providers' programmes are already in high demand, if the provider has close collaboration with the business sector, and strong organisational networking in place.

Some interviewees also highlighted that using a common quality framework for micro-credentials that is currently applied by higher education institutions can also aid their collaboration with the university sector, as the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability promote utilisation of common tools (such as ECTS)[24]. In their view, learners could benefit after the completion of the MC – as it supports mutual understanding of educational outcomes, could facilitate its smoother recognition and is valuable for employment prospects.

All interviewees agreed that the label could be beneficial for establishing partnerships with industries too. One interviewee, representing a company with global reach, explained that some quality labels are highly recognised by employers, enhance the credibility of the programmes and support learners in pursuing employment opportunities. Professional labels specifically help to bridge the gap between academia and the labour market, as they signify that the programme meets both academic and professional standards. Labelled programmes demonstrate that learners' knowledge and skills meet certain European and/or sectoral standards.

### Scenarios on implementing the quality label

When discussing the scenarios for implementing a quality label, interviewees had different opinions – some believed, similarly to QA agencies, that awarding the label to the provider itself would be more efficient. However, others felt that awarding the label to individual micro-credential would ensure that each meets the necessary standards and requirements, providing greater transparency for the learners and the employers.

For some of the interviewees representing companies with global reach, a certification (and hence labelling) of the provider over the micro-credential programme was met with reluctance – implying more standards to companies "*can inundate innovation and lessen motivation to undergo quality assurance processes as understood in the EHEA*".

Regarding the awarder of a label, both options of a European wide entity or organisation and quality assurance agency were acceptable. For providers that are deeply situated in the national context, act in the public interest and whose primary focus is attracting domestic learners, the preference lay within a body situated in its own system. European-wide organisations were also considered acceptable. One interviewee, representing a platform offering short courses and defining criteria for continuing education providers, emphasised that introducing an additional layer of assessment by a European entity could improve the quality of offerings. This external process could address aspects not previously considered by their internal quality assurance mechanisms.

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[24] When talking about their learning offers, commercially oriented companies often highlighted having short-courses bearing ECTS as very important. ECTS were found as common popular framework and tool and a fundament for recognition and credibility

The reputation of the awarding body and financial considerations emerged as factors for selecting the organisation (or body) which would establish and issue the label.

# 4. **Discussion**

The study assessed the feasibility of implementing a quality label for providers that operate in alignment with the principles of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Leaning and Employability. By drawing insights from a desk study, focus groups and interviews, the paper examines the perceived benefits, potential challenges, and possible scenarios for implementation.

The study demonstrated that issuing a quality label is already a practice for some EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies and is employed in a variety of ways and in a number of ESG-aligned QA activities. Labels usually demonstrate compliance with the standards against which they are evaluated, but in some cases, they demonstrate excellence in particular areas (e.g. research metrics, sustainability tools etc.).

The analysis indicates that implementing a quality label could provide tangible benefits. Insights from the focus groups and interviews highlight credibility, integrity, and trust as the key benefits expected from the label. Additionally, the label is expected to be an important marketing tool, enabling providers to strengthen their positioning in both the local and the international market, and to attract more learners. Alternative providers also foresee the label as an asset for building partnerships with higher education institution and employers.

The findings also reveal challenges and risks in implementing the label. Both QA agencies and alternative providers emphasised the importance of considering the nature of micro-credentials when developing the label and noted that the higher pace of changes between the cycles of the MC programmes might outdate the awarded label.

The study findings further show that while implementing a label has benefits, maintaining the label and preventing its misuse would mean a high workload, potentially leading to higher (staff) costs for the awarder. The desk analysis of quality labels issued by EQAR-registered agencies highlighted several good practices such as establishing clear guidelines for visual details, conditions, and the timestamp of the use of the label, issuing registration numbers and certificates for using the label, as well as public registers allowing stakeholders to confirm the validity of the certificates and public databases of labelled programmes and/or providers, are helpful tools for maintaining integrity and preventing the misuse of labels.

The risk of stratification among providers was also raised as a potential issue, as not every provider may be able to afford obtaining the label, should the awarding costs be high.

The study also explored the expected scenarios of implementing the label. Awarding the label to a provider is believed to be an efficient and preferred model among QA agencies and for some providers. Awarding it per micro-credential seems to be a better option in cases when the stakeholders wish to ensure that each micro-credential meets the standards and offer further transparency into the reviewed courses. Evaluating every single micro-credential would however create a higher workload both for the awarder and the provider .

One way forward to tackling the issue of high costs for the awarder is to incorporate a micro-credential label within the already existing (ESG aligned) labels or re-instate widely recognised quality label (for e.g. the ECTS Label) that have been prominently used by higher education institutions so far. On the former approach, further mapping of the quality standards behind the selected label should be performed to make sure that all principles of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability are sufficiently covered. On the latter approach,  further adaptation to the context of alternative providers and entities operating in QF levels other than those of higher education

should be considered (following the variety of approaches to micro-credentials regarding the level of the learning outcomes in different systems in the EHEA).

Most QA agencies prefer the label to be awarded by themselves. Such a model, however, should take into consideration that not all EQAR registered agencies have competences or remit in (a) areas outside of higher education (e.g. continuing education and training), (b) reviewing providers that are not higher education institutions (e.g. private companies) or (c) areas outlined in the principles of the Council's Recommendation (e.g. the portability and authenticity of the micro-credential), hence making them ineligible to perform reviews and award labels to all micro-credentials and/or all providers that are taken in consideration by the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability. While tackling the first two issues would (mainly) imply legislature changes on system level, the third one would require that the concerned QA agencies amend their review methodologies to include the additional areas.

In addition, the legal competences of the QA agencies to issue a quality label in the first place should be further explored, should this model be followed.

On the other hand, alternative providers' opinions varied based on their type (for profit or acting in public interest) and market focus (local/national or international). In any of the scenarios, a couple of points of attention should be taking into account.

First, while the public bodies and field specific organisations could be deemed as appropriate actors to create and award a label that will signal compliance with the principles of the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability, they may lack the technical knowledge on performing external quality assurance in line with the ESGs[25]. Collaboration with EQAR-registered QA agencies should be strongly encouraged in order to ensure that the reviews are performed by QA peer review experts.

Second, a label awarded by a European entity or organisation could have a greater advantage over labels awarded by other actors, as it could be recognised by more users. As a result, a European label could help enhancing the trust in the micro-credential provisions offered by alternative providers in the EHEA, and also serve as a tool to attract more international learners. This model though, may not be as successful in systems which are more inward looking (i.e. in which there is a strong trust in the local/regional products and system).

# 5. Conclusions

The aim of this analysis is to provide a concise outline of the key advantages and disadvantages identified throughout the feasibility study and elaborated in the discussion part. The summary of the pros and cons enables readers to quickly evaluate the benefits and understand the challenges related to a label.

### Advantages

The following points outline the benefits of establishing a quality label:

- **Sign of credibility, integrity, and trust –** highlights the credibility and integrity of the education provider or offering, fostering trust among stakeholders. Quality labels provide benefits for providers by enhancing their credibility, particularly when the label is recognised at a national and European level.

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[25] It should be acknowledged though that the Council's Recommendation on the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability only strongly recommends the use of the ESGs as quality framework for external quality assurance, rather than prescribing it as the only framework.

- **Enhanced visibility** – a sign signalling to stakeholders that the institution or programme has undergone an external review and meets the standards.

- **Positional tool** -  enables providers to strengthen their presence in both the local and international market, and to attract more learners.

- **Asset for building partnerships** - an asset for alternative education providers to build partnerships with higher education institutions and employers. Professional labels specifically help to bridge the gap between academia and the labour market, as they signify that the programme meets both academic and professional standards.

## Disadvantages

While establishing a label offers a wide range of benefits, it also presents certain challenges and issues:

- **Nature of micro-credentials** – the higher pace of change between the cycles of the micro-credential programmes might outdate the awarded label.

- **Implied costs** - maintaining the label and preventing its misuse increases the staff workload, potentially leading to higher (staff) costs for the awarder.

- **The risk of stratification of providers** – accessibility and the cost of the label might put some higher education providers at a disadvantage compared to other education providers, potentially leading to unfair competition among them.

- **Creating confusion among users** – existence of multiple quality labels that use the same quality framework can create a feeling of uncertainty regarding which label is trustworthy .

Regarding the initial question of whether there is a need for a new label that would serve as an anchoring quality standard, the outcomes suggest that while using a label signalling compliance with the ESG has an added value for the alternative providers, exploring the opportunities to utilise some of the already existent labels or models (e.g. authorising QA agencies to award a label created by a European entity or organisation) can make the process more efficient and less resource-consuming. While the label is a viable way to demonstrate compliance with the European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability, its implementation, if decided, must be carefully managed through close engagement of stakeholders and thoughtful consideration of the challenges outlined. Furthermore, tailoring the label to the needs of MCs and addressing the key issues such as maintaining flexibility and ensuring equitable access will be important to the label's long-term success.

# Glossary[26]

**Accreditation**: a review process to assess if an institution or programme meets predetermined standards. The process is conducted by an external review body.

**Alternative provider**: an entity that provides learning opportunities at higher education level (i.e. EQF levels 5 to 8; QF-EHEA cycle short to third), but that does not have full (recognised) degree awarding powers themselves.

**Awarder**: the body that certifies the provision. The awarding body may differ from the provider, e.g. in the case of partnerships, franchise.

**Certification**: a review process to assess if an alternative education provider or micro-credential programme meets predetermined standards. The process is conducted by an external review body.

**The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015):** The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. The ESG 2015 were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area in May 2015.

**Full (recognised) degree**: a document awarded by a higher education institution that attests the successful completion of a programme at QF level (5), 6, 7 or 8 and that is officially recognised as part of the national system by at least one national authority in the EHEA.

**Higher education institution** (**HEI**): an entity that has full degree awarding powers at higher education level (i.e. EQF levels 5 to 8; QF-EHEA cycle first to third) recognised by at least one national authority.

**Micro-credential**: a certified small volume of learning (i.e. workload <60 ECTS), not leading to a full (recognised) degree. Micro-credentials may be provided through a cooperation of different providers.

**Programme**: learning provision that can lead to a full degree (traditional programmes offered by HEIs) or to another type of certificate (i.e. micro-credentials or other provisions offered by HEIs or other providers). Whenever there is a difference, the handbook points to "programme leading to full degree" and "programme not leading to a full degree" (e.g. micro-credentials).

**Provider**: any actor that provides degree programmes, micro-credentials or other learning opportunities in terms of teaching, classes, learning materials, etc. This may include higher education institutions (public, private, academic, professional, preparatory, initial, continuing, adult, local, foreign, cross-border, European or international), as well as other providers, including employers, companies, social partners, NGOs, public authorities and others.

**QF-EHEA level**: a cycle defined in the overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA); when used for a programme, the indication of a level refers to the learning outcomes of the programme aligning with the generic learning outcomes as defined for the given cycle in the QF-EHEA.

**Quality label:** An official recognition that indicates an institution or educational offering meets certain standards. Quality labels, which include quality marks, seals and signs, can be established by different entities.

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[26] EQAR Documentation: https://docs.deqar.eu/.

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# Annex 1. Table of Labels implemented through an authorisation by the owner of the label

| Label name | Owner of the label | Implementing EQAR-registered QA agencies | Implementation Format | Reports in the organisation's repository |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| EUR-ACE | The European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAEE) | AAQ, ANECA, ARACIS, ASIIN, CTI, FINEEC, CAAAE | Through authorisation | 4479 |
| Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation (CeQuInt) | The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) | CTI, NVAO, HCERES, Unibasq, ACSUCYL, AQAS, ACSUG, PKA, ZEvA | Through authorisation | 70 |
| Euro-Inf Quality Label | European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education | ANECA, ASIIN | By EQANIE; Through authorisation | 455 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (EQANIE) | | | |
| Eurolabel Chemistry Quality Label | The European Chemistry Thematic Network Association (ECTN) | ANECA, ASIIN | By ECTN; Through authorisation | 181 |
| EQAS Food Quality Label | ISEKI-Food Association | ASIIN | In partnership with ASIIN | N/A |

# Annex 2. Table of QA labels implemented by quality assurance agencies

| Agency | Label | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ) | Seal of quality | Awarded after successful certification of quality systems in Austria |
| Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (ACPUA) | ALCAEUS | Awarded after institutional evaluation measuring the degree of commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. |
| Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU) | Accreditation of educational programs (ex-ante) | Awarded label demonstrates successful certification |
| | Additional dimensions in accreditation (internationalisation, employment and research) | Awarded label demonstrates positive outcome (1) or excellence (2) |
| | Short learning programs (micro-credentials) | Awarded label demonstrates positive outcome |
| | Certification of the internal quality assurance system (IQAS) | Awarded label demonstrates successful certification |
| | Institutional accredited centre | Awarded label demonstrates successful accreditation |
| | Quality assurance of research department level | Awarded label demonstrates positive outcome (1) or excellence (2) |
| | Accreditation of an | Awarded label demonstrates successful |

| | international educational facility for cooperation and academic mobility | accreditation |
|---|---|---|
| The Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Mathematics (ASSIN e.v.) | ASIIN-AMSEE label | For evaluating the institutions and programmes in medical field |
| | The ASIIN Seal | The ASIIN seal confirms that a course of study meets the high-level requirements of science and professional practice of the involved disciplines. |
| Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg (evalag) | Institutional Quality Label | Awarded label demonstrates successful institutional review |
| Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) | FIBAA Quality Seal for Institutional Accreditation | Awarded label demonstrates high quality of the institution (FIBAA Seal) or that institution exceeds the quality standards (FIBAA Premium Seal) |
| | FIBAA Quality Seal for Programme Accreditation | Awarded label demonstrates high quality (FIBAA Seal) or outstanding quality (FIBAA Premium Seal) of accredited programme |
| | FIBAA Quality Seal for Institutional Accreditation: Strategic Management | Awarded label demonstrates that institution is innovative, dynamic, future-oriented and entrepreneurial in its way of thinking and acting (FIBAA Seal) or exceeds the quality standards (FIBAA Premium Seal) |
| | FIBAA Seal for certified continuing education courses | Awarded label demonstrates high quality (FIBAA Seal) or outstanding quality (FIBAA Premium Seal) of certified education course |
| | FIBAA Quality Seal for Institutional Audit Austria | Awarded label demonstrates high quality of the reviewed institution |
| Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) | Quality label for excellence | The Quality Label for Excellence is awarded to higher education institutions that have distinguished themselves with their commitment to enhancement work of exceptionally high quality. |
| German Accreditation Council (GAC) | System accreditation; Programme Accreditation | Labels are awarded through German quality assurance agencies |
| Estonian Quality Assurance Agency for Education (HAKA) | HAKA Quality Label | The Quality Label is awarded after successful accreditation of HEI and testifies that the management and development of studies and research in the higher education institution are effective and that the institution |

| | Estonian e-course Quality Label | The Quality Label confirms the good level of the e-course and is an acknowledgement to the designer and teacher, who have achieved good results in the application of digital technology in the learning process. |
|---|---|---|
| | Digital Education Quality Label | Courses that demonstrate excellence in applying digital technologies in teaching and learning may be awarded the Excellence in Digital Education label. |
| Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) | Evaluated by IEP | Confirms institutional evaluation by IEP |
| Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) | The QAA Quality Mark | Awarded after successful external review |
| Agency for Quality of the Basque University System (Unibasq) | Unibasq Quality Label | Voluntary acknowledgements granted by the agency at the request of the Universities |
| | Unibasq Dual Label | To evaluate proposals for Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes submitted for the recognition of dual training or alternation between university and entity |
| Fundación para el Conocimiento Madrimasd (madri+d) | Cualificam Programme | Certificies quality of master degree programs |
| Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC) | Accreditation Label | Awarded after successful external review |
| Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Canonical Programmes of Studies in Germany (AKAST) | AKAST Quality Label | Awarded after successful external review |

# Annex 3. Interviewed Participants

| Organisation | Country | Type of the provider | Been through the external review by EQAR-registered QA agency | Information about the provider |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| VDAB Belgium | Belgium | Public organisation | No | VDAB Belgium is a public employment service that serves |

| | | | | as a platform for online and face-to-face training in Flanders and Brussels. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ORAC Publishing House | Hungary | Private company | No | Orac Publishing House is a publishing organization. ORAC's Academy provides training courses for lawyers. |
| Coursera | US, international scope covering Europe | Private company | Yes | Coursera is a platform for online learning, offering courses to individuals and organizations. |
| Sparkassenakademie Nordrhein-Westfalen | Germany | Private company | Yes | Sparkassenakademie Nordrhein-Westfalen is an education provider that offers training and courses in further education. |
| Training and International Education Center | Kazakhstan | Private company | Yes | Training and International Education Center is an education provider that offers training courses for teachers. |