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**Micro-credentials and Lifelong Learning in Higher Education:
Italian and Kazakh regulatory frameworks**

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Abstract: Micro-credentials have gained attention in public policies over the last few years. This paper, the scope of which is on micro-credentials in higher education with a particular focus on the European and Asian perspective, will explore the key policy documents in the European context, some of the available evidence, and the link between Higher Education, training, labour market and micro-credentials in the analysis of two national case studies in Italy and Kazakhstan.

Key words: micro-credentials, higher education, lifelong learning, Italy, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Lifelong learning has been a recurrent topic in European policy documents in the last two decades. It is referred to in all the 10 Communiqués signed by Ministers in charge of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area, including the 1999 Bologna Declaration and already in the 1998 Paris Declaration. Another recurrent term in almost all the communiqués is employability, for which there is through the communiqués increasing relevance attached to skills and the need to adapt to changing societies. In the last two Communiqués, intersected with these two threads, the policy conversation saw a third element, that of micro-credentials, seen as a way to support lifelong learning and to enable learners to develop or update their cultural, professional, and transversal skills and competences at various stages in their lives [1; 2].

In the European Union context, in the period 2019-2024 micro-credentials are referred to in a significant number of policy documents regarding skills, education and digitalization. The EU Skills Agenda identifies micro-credentials as a way to upskill and reskill professionals, to value learning outcomes and to increase permeability and flexibility between different education

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sectors and pathways [3]. The same value of upskilling and reskilling is referred to in the EU Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027 [4]. The importance of adult learning is reflected in one of the 3 targets defined by the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, establishing that at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year (in 2022 the percentage of adult learning for the European Union was 47%) [5]. In 2022, the share of people aged 25 to 64 in the EU who had participated in education or training in the previous 12 months was 47% [6].

The concept of micro-credentials is not new in itself. The idea of short learning provisions targeted at upskilling and reskilling, to support lifelong learning and employability has been present in many countries of the European Higher Education Area for a number of years [7; 8]. But at the same time 'micro-credential' is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of provisions: including 'nano-degrees', 'MicroMasters', 'certificates', 'badges', 'licences' and 'endorsements' [8; 9].

To fulfil the mission that European public policies assign to micro-credentials, governments see the need of a common framework and understanding of micro-credentials [1; 10; 11; 12]. In the European context a significant push in this direction has come since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic 2020. In this changing context, micro-credentials have been seen as instruments to support upskilling and reskilling to address the recovery from the pandemic and the green and digital transition, and to bring people back to work, to support the creation of new jobs and address specific skills gaps [3; 10; 13]. Between 2020 and 2022, various policy efforts were undertaken, including the formation of a higher education consultation group on micro-credentials within the European Union. This group laid the groundwork for a unified European approach to micro-credentials. Additionally, the Erasmus+ MICROBOL project played a key role in building consensus around a common micro-credential framework within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) [3; 14].

The policy conversation on micro-credentials is not limited to the European context, with many countries and regions taking the initiative to support definitions and frameworks for micro-credentials. UNESCO too worked in this direction to define micro-credentials and their role in education [15; 16]. The lifelong learning approach, aimed at serving the diverse education needs of youth and adults, is one of the six major challenges that need to be overcome in "reinventing Higher Education". Short courses and micro-credentials are seen as a vital way to tackle the educational needs of adults at different stages of their personal and professional lives. Flexible learning pathways, recognition, mobility, and internationalisation are one of the 9 ways to navigate towards 2030 [17].

The conversation on micro-credentials is also a conversation on the shifting concept of qualification, enlarging the 'traditional' concept of degree (from Old French *degré*, 'a step forward', 'achievement') to the term credential (from Latin *credere* "to believe, trust", something that you can trust in) [18; 19]. This 'extended' concept is captured by the UNESCO Global Convention on recognition of qualifications, which significantly expands both the term qualification and the concept of recognition, encompassing a variety of provisions including validation of prior learning [20].

Methodology

The research was based on the analysis of key policy documents and regulatory frameworks from both Italy and Kazakhstan, as well as relevant European and international sources. The

work progressed through several stages: identification and examination of legal and policy materials, selection of national case studies, collection of supplementary evidence, and interpretation of results. The methods applied included policy and regulatory analysis, case study approach, comparative analysis, and review of available evidence such as data from the European Union's Adult Education Survey and Labour Force Survey. Each author contributed to the process: data collection, interpretation, and analysis were divided among the team, while the Italian case study was conducted as a research project, involving in-depth examination of legislative sources and publications on the recognition of qualifications.

Results

Research has been done on providing evidence of the impact of micro-credentials, to assess to what extent they can be an effective instrument in the direction designed by policy documents. One of the challenges in an evidence-based approach is related to the difficulties of exactly defining micro-credentials and making a comparison across different countries and higher education systems. With this methodological caveat, and in a landscape that is still evolving, there are some elements that seem to emerge. Research has consistently shown that adults aged 25-54 who possess higher education qualifications, demonstrate stronger information processing abilities, work in larger companies, and earn higher incomes are significantly more inclined to engage in non-formal learning and training activities compared to individuals with differing profiles [21]. Comparable trends in learner characteristics are also observed in various national and international data sources, including the European Union's "Adult Education Survey and Labour Force Survey" [22]. This trend seems to be reconfirmed also by the latest data: the perceived need for education and training increases with the level of educational attainment, seeing adults with tertiary qualifications being more inclined to attend training than their counterparts with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment [23]. By the same token, also the level of the micro-credentials seems to have an impact on potential learners: "Short learning programmes at the pre-bachelor level have a much higher proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged learners than micro-credential programmes offered by learning platforms such as Coursera or edX, whose learners are typically experienced workers holding academic degrees". Looking at the impact on the learner, another element is that programmes specifically linked to in-demand or growing industries show better outcomes. Furthermore "targeted and short-term credentials appear to work well when 'topping-up' existing higher education but have a mixed impact on those without a bachelor's degree" in terms of completion and of benefits after the end of the programme [24].

According to the EU definition a micro-credential is a "record of the learning outcomes". However, evidence from a pilot study in the European region reflects that very few micro-credentials are defined with learning outcomes: of 1,048 micro-credentials examined, 27% have well-structured learning outcomes, 24.71% have unstructured and confused learning outcomes, and in the majority of cases, learning outcomes are completely absent [25].

How a job profile relates to skills and to the development of micro-credentials, and how micro-credentials can support developing the skills needed by the labour market, is shown in two case studies, the example of micro-credentials developed in Italy for credential evaluators,

and by the reform carried out in Kazakhstan. Italy and Kazakhstan are both part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and of the ASEM Education process, where there are two expert groups respectively on balanced mobility and on lifelong learning and TVET, and micro-credentials are one of the developments to be followed by the process [26; 27; 28]. Among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan stands out as the only nation that is officially part of the EHEA, while also participating in the emerging Central Asia Higher Education Area (CAHEA). The CAHEA was formally initiated through the signing of the Turkestan Declaration in 2021 by five regional countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – during a ministerial conference on education held in Turkestan [29]. The declaration explicitly affirms a shared intention to align with the principles of the Bologna Process and the EHEA, acknowledging its role in advancing higher education, enhancing graduate employability, fostering inclusive education systems, and promoting structural reforms across the sector [31].

Discussion

In Italy, since 1990, legislation allows for the provision of shorter courses targeted at the labour market. Since 1990, Higher Education Institutions can offer short courses and lifelong learning programmes targeted at adult learners (Law n. 341, 19 November 1990). This policy has been reaffirmed in legislation in 1999 (Law n. 4, 14 January 1999), and in 2013 general rules for the validation and certification of formal and informal learning were set.

In 2022, Italy carried out its second referencing of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the European Qualifications Framework. As part of this process, micro-credentials were formally linked to the Italian NQF, and defined as qualifications comprising one or more competences that form broader qualifications. These are awarded within the National Competences for Certification System following short-term educational experiences, which may be flexible, personalized, and modular in format. The NQF's eight levels include sub-levels to reflect variations within each level, with micro-credentials categorized as sub-level "0", described as "a micro-credential consisting of one or more competences from a broader qualification" [31].

According to this legal framework, Italian Higher Education Institutions for more than 30 years have offered a number of lifelong learning opportunities that can fall under the definition of micro-credential.

As indicated above, also in Italy – one of the first countries affected in 2020 by the Coronavirus in the European context – the pandemic stressed the need for upskilling and reskilling. In this context of transformation the idea to organize a course for admission officers, staff of international relations, and more in general professionals working in the field of recognition of qualifications in Italian Higher Education Institutions took hold. The course was organised by CIMEA, the Italian National Information Centre on recognition of qualifications (part of the European ENIC-NARIC networks of 56 centres), together with the European University of Rome. It lasted from June to September 2020 and reached the maximum number set of 40 participants. Those who completed the course, and passed a final assessment (project work), were awarded a micro-credential professional certificate by CIMEA (awarded in the CIMEA blockchain system *Diplome*) and the "Diploma di perfezionamento" by Università Europea di Roma (the latter only if the person had the access requirements, i.e. a bachelor/EHEA first cycle degree).

During the course, participants underlined the need for a clear definition of the job of credential evaluator, of its tasks and competences, both for transparency and for consistent recognition of the value of the profession. From this need, CIMEA, in agreement with the Ministry for Universities and Research, started the procedure for formalizing the 'reference practice' for the professional profile of credential evaluator. The 'Reference Practices' (PdRs) introduce technical prescriptions or sectoral application models of specific standards when there are no national, European or international standards or draft standards [32]. A group of experts was created to define standards of the profession together with UNI, a private, non-profit association that oversees developing, publishing and disseminating voluntary technical standards of non-regulated professions in Italy. The group of experts was composed of a representative from CIMEA (project coordinator), the Conference of University Rectors, higher education institutions, and the Ministry for Education, Universities and Research as observer. The definition underwent a public consultation, and the reference practice was published in October 2022. The process took one year, and the outcome, the "UNI Reference Practice Number 120:2021", was published in October 2021 and made available for consultation to the public both in Italian and English. The process leading to the final text was a research project, defining the reference legislation, the tasks and activities of credential evaluators, their knowledge, skills, responsibilities and level of autonomy. This was done analysing the legislative reference for recognition at national European and international level (e.g. Lisbon Recognition Convention and subsidiary texts, the Global convention on recognition of qualifications, other relevant Conventions and recommendations), research and publications on recognition, and previous experience in training and skills development in the field managed by CIMEA and ENIC-NARIC networks. This analysis work served as the basis to identify, disarticulate and define the tasks, the knowledge and skills of credential evaluators.

The mapping exercise identified 15 tasks, 44 categories of knowledge (K) and 51 skills (S). A few examples of knowledge and skills follow:

Knowledge:

K1: *Be familiar with the principles of the Lisbon Convention and its subsidiary texts, with the principles of the international conventions on the recognition of qualifications (global convention and regional conventions) and with the national legislation on recognition.*

K2: *Understand what information on the qualifications for which recognition is being requested is necessary and adequate for the procedures and criteria adopted to be transparent, consistent and reliable.*

Skills:

S1: *Know how to conduct the evaluation procedure, from the request to the appeal, in line with the principles of the Lisbon Convention and its subsidiary texts, and on the basis of national legislation on recognition.*

S2: *Know how to find necessary and adequate information on the qualifications for which recognition is requested for the procedures and criteria adopted to be transparent, consistent and reliable*

Among the requirements to access the profession or to maintain professional standards, there is the need to do at least 75 hours of training per year, which can be reached by a number of means, including micro-credentials.

After the reference practice was published, it served to further support the definition of learning outcomes of the micro-credentials, to provide the necessary skills to be defined as

credential evaluator or to maintain updated the professional standards. According to the definition of 'credential evaluator' contained in the reference practice a professional association, Italian Professional Association of Credential Evaluators (APICE) was also created. Since its establishment, APICE has also cooperated in the organisation of the specialisation courses for credential evaluators, that are now at their fifth edition.

In the Italian experience, the micro-credentials served in creating a community of practice, and as a push to support a better and more consistent definition of a job profile and of skills, in a virtuous circle in which training supported transparency in definition of skills and knowledge, and clearer skills and knowledge supported better definition of learning outcomes contributing to increased quality and impact of the training and micro-credentials offer.

After the first experience in 2020, the micro-credential course for credential evaluator reached its fifth edition planned for 2025. The micro-credential awarded is a standalone course, assessed under the internal quality assurance mechanism of the awarding institution. It is level 7 EQF/EHEA QF 2nd cycle qualification. The access requirement is a bachelor degree or equivalent, but if a prospective candidate does not have it, it is still possible to attend the course receiving at the end only the CIMEA professional certificate, in a logic of inclusion and of supporting upskilling and reskilling. The micro-credential is awarded together with a micro-credential supplement, also in blockchain, that contains all the transparency elements of the micro-credential in line with the standard elements of micro-credentials detailed in the EU Council Recommendation for micro-credentials (including learning outcomes, type of quality assurance, assessment, workload in ECTS, plus additional elements such as mode of verification of the certificate etc.).

The Kazakh approach to micro-credentials is framed in the context of two reference laws: Law "On Professional Qualifications" n. 14 of 4 July 2023, that defines the concepts of professions, registers, recognition of professional qualification, competences, etc; and the national Law on Education, n. 319 of 27 July, 2007, that sets, among others, the elements of the programmes of 'additional education', including 'professional development programmes for specialists aimed at developing professional competencies adequate to modern requirements' and 'retraining programmes for specialists aimed at obtaining qualifications, taking into account the needs of the labour market'.

The concept of micro-credentials is included in Kazakhstan's Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science for 2023-2029, as updated by the Government Resolution No. 471 dated June 14, 2024. Within this framework, micro-credentials are positioned as a tool for delivering targeted, skill-based learning either alongside or following a student's primary academic programme. This is particularly emphasized in the context of vocational and technical education. For example, in preparing vocational education instructors and engineer-pedagogues for college-level teaching, the concept allows practical training to be integrated through dual education pathways. This allows them to study the methodology of technical and vocational education while acquiring sufficient competencies.

Minor programmes and micro-credentials programmes in all areas of training in accordance with professional standards provide students with the opportunity to be certified for qualifications at levels 4-5 of the National Qualifications Framework. In the same document, micro-credentials are referred to as a way to support lifelong learning for all learners.

In Kazakhstan, a micro-credential is officially defined as the volume of knowledge, skills, and competences required to carry out a distinct labour function in accordance with a professional standard or within the scope of a particular profession. These credentials are acquired through short-term training programs (State Compulsory Standard of Higher Education On the Approval of State-Established Compulsory Standards for Higher and Postgraduate Education. Order of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, dated July 20, 2022, No. 2. Registered with the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan on July 27, 2022, No. 28916).

To support institutions in delivering such programs, a methodological guide has been developed, detailing the procedures for designing, implementing, and recognizing micro-credentials. The guide draws on national regulatory and legal frameworks and emphasizes enhancing educational quality, aligning with labour market needs, and fostering lifelong learning. It was reviewed and approved by the Sectoral Council on Professional Qualifications in the field of Science and Higher Education and is recommended for use by educational institutions. (Protocol No. 3, dated December 12, 2024).

Micro-credentials are part of the learning offer of universities. Procedures are in place both for implementation of micro-credentials with employers, and for their recognition. Specifically, micro-credential programmes are applied in higher and postgraduate education in two ways: the first one is the inclusion in the curricula of educational programmes if the learning outcomes are met. In this case, programmes of micro-credentials can be included in the curricula of the course as an additional educational programme or as a standalone course. In this case, they can consist of one or more modules and can be offered either in face-to-face or distance learning formats. If the final assessment is successfully completed, a certificate is issued, and the obtained micro-credential is included in the course curriculum, with the competencies recorded in the diploma supplement. The workload is expressed in ECTS, and the typical range for the volume of a micro-credential programme is from 1 to 5 academic credits. Quality assurance of micro-degrees is considered either within the framework of existing mechanisms of institutional or programme accreditation, or as part of the certification and evaluation process.

The second procedure is related to the recognition of micro-credentials, which go beyond the educational programme and may be offered by alternative providers. In this case, its volume can reach 45 or more credits. The final document confirming the completion of this programme is a separate certificate, which is not linked to the diploma supplement. The recognition of the competencies gained for employment purposes or for further studies is carried out through the transfer/recognition of learning outcomes obtained in other organizations. Currently, there is no public registry of micro-credentials in Kazakhstan; only a registry of full-cycle educational programs exists. However, discussions are ongoing regarding the possibility of developing and approving a unified registry of micro-credentials.

In line with the Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029, Kazakhstan has a platform for provision of professional training. The Skills Enbek professional training platform (<https://skills.enbek.kz/ru>) was launched in 2021, developed on the principle of a marketplace and is the Kazakh equivalent of international training platforms, like Coursera. The platform gives access to online courses to acquire new knowledge and improve skills. It offers 629 courses in various areas offered by 164 providers, and more than 487,000 users, of which 401,000 have successfully completed the

training. Certificates obtained on the platform are automatically reflected in the resume on the employment portal "Electronic Labor Exchange", which increases the chances of job seekers when applying for a job. 38 courses are provided by Kazakh Universities, with more than 15,800 users signed up, and about 2,500 completed the training and received a certificate.

Conclusion

In Italy and Kazakhstan there is not a specific legislation on micro-credentials as such, but the provision of short learning courses targeted at upskilling and reskilling, for lifelong learning and for a better match with labour market needs is a long-standing reality, and allows for the provision of micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials are seen following the same approach, in line with the EHEA approach, that looks at micro-credentials as an instrument for lifelong learning and for meeting the requirements of learners, changing societies and labour markets.

From the Italian perspective, the inclusion of micro-credentials in the National Qualifications Framework could be an instrument to support transparency and recognition of micro-credentials awarded, while further research would be needed to measure the impact of this change and more in general of micro-credentials at large.

From the Kazakh perspective, the existence of the online platform and the data on its usage seems to confirm a few of the trends described in literature, with more users and a high rate of completion of courses in the VET and professional postgraduate sector.

In both countries, conversation and policy discussions on micro-credentials have been a forum of exchange between Higher Education Institutions, VET, labour market and non-formal providers.

While micro-credentials in both countries are part of a heterogeneous landscape, more analysis would be needed to monitor the impact of micro-credentials on further studies and for employment. Another area, looking at the Italian definition of standards for non-regulated professions, could the potential role played by micro-credentials for improving quality and skills for specific job profiles on one side, and on the other to what extent such skills and competences are transparently and clearly recorded in the certification awarded.

Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to the preparation of this article. The final version submitted for publication was thoroughly discussed and agreed upon by every author.

The specific roles were distributed as follows:

Luca Lantero – carried out the collection and interpretation of results, and made an important contribution to shaping the concept and design of the study.

Chiara Finocchietti – worked on analyzing the outcomes of the research, formulated proposals, and endorsed the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Aitzhan Kulumzhanova – undertook critical review of the text and its content, gathered and analyzed supplementary data, and ensured the reliability of the results as well as the coherence of the article as a whole.

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Жоғары білім берудегі микробіліктіліктер мен өмір бойы оқу: Италия мен Қазақстанның нормативтік-құқықтық базасы

Андатпа: Соңғы жылдары микробіліктіліктер жоғары білім беру жүйесінде және қоғамдық саясатта өзекті мәселелердің біріне айналды. Бұл мақалада Еуропа және Азия елдерінің, әсіресе Италия мен Қазақстанның тәжірибесі негізінде жоғары білім беру саласындағы микробіліктіліктердің рөлі қарастырылады. Еуропалық саясат аясындағы негізгі құжаттар мен бар деректерге сүйене отырып, жоғары білім, кәсіби даярлық, еңбек нарығы және микробіліктіліктер арасындағы өзара байланыс талданады.

Түйін сөздер: микробіліктіліктер, жоғары білім, өмір бойы оқу, Италия, Қазақстан

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Микроквалификации и непрерывное обучение в высшем образовании: нормативно-правовая база Италии и Казахстана

Аннотация: Микроквалификации привлекли внимание в сфере государственной политики за последние несколько лет. Настоящая работа, сфокусированная на микроквалификациях в высшем образовании с особым акцентом на европейский и азиатский контекст, рассматривает ключевые программные документы в европейской перспективе, имеющие данные, а также взаимосвязь между высшим образованием, профессиональной подготовкой, рынком труда и микроквалификациями на примере двух национальных кейсов – Италии и Казахстана.

Ключевые слова: микроквалификации, высшее образование, обучение на протяжении всей жизни, Италия, Казахстан

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