

Between Policy Design and Policy Implementation:
A Look at Quality Assurance of Microcredentials in South Africa and
Central Europe (AT-HU)

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First, we start with a look at policy in Hungary and Austria



The common denominator of policy in AT and HU: European Approach to Micro-credentials established by the Council Recommendation of 2022



Why: To address rapidly changing societal and economic demands in Europe in the aftermath of the pandemic by creating a cohesive system for small-scale learning experiences across the EU.

How: Standardization of micro-credentials across EU through several "building blocks":

- **Common Definition:** A micro-credential is defined as a record of learning outcomes acquired following a "small volume of learning". These must be assessed against transparent standards and be owned by the learner.
- **Standard Description Elements for microcredentials**
- Provisions for **quality, transparency, relevance, assessment, portability, stackability**

Regulatory Framework Comparison:

AUSTRIA

- **Overall purpose is to support lifelong learning and inclusion**
- Key objective: Recognition of non-linear biographies; creating a "second pillar" of higher education.
- Only Higher Education Institutions can offer ECTS carrying MC (3 - 15 ECTS credits)
- No formal need to link MC to NQF
- HEI are responsible for QA of MC
- Some HEIs have integrated micro-credentials into curricular modules while other offer them as standalone stackable programs

HUNGARY

- **Focus on Vocational Education & Training (VET)**
- Main rationale is labor force re- and up-skilling economic response to industry needs and overall economic alignment
- A VET provider may issue a micro-credential for the knowledge and skills acquired in vocational education, if there is an agreement with HEI to validate learning outcomes.
- Micro-credentials have not yet been formally integrated into the Hungarian National Qualifications but there are ongoing discussions about how to incorporate them into the framework in alignment with the EQF.
- Policy innovation: Individual Learning Account (ILA)

Differences and similarities

Similarities

- Both countries have higher participation rates in adult education than the EU average
- Both countries implement the European Council recommendations (2022)
- Both countries have passed new regulation or specifications regarding MC
- Both countries have fluctuating funding for adult education but the situation in Hungary is more difficult due to current political tensions with European Commission

Differences

- In Hungary , the focus is on VET, labor force needs and alignment with national economic priorities while in Austria focus is on lifelong learning in general with an inclusion lens
- In Austria just HEI can provide ECTS while in Hungary adult training providers are entitled to issue micro-credentials (in VET)
- Austria does not require linking MC to the NQF while Hungary considers linking it to the EQF
- Both countries have specific administrative hurdles (complex MC policy architecture)

Case study of **Central European University**



Profile : Research intensive university based in Vienna

Focus: Social sciences and Humanities

Part of CIVICA University Alliance together with Sciences Po, LSE, Bocconi, IE, Hertie School, SNSPA

Offers very few micro-credentials at the moment though we had several attempts

Example: the OSUN Professional Development for HEI Managers

Current challenge: creating a CIVICA wide MC program (needs assessment, pathways, funding)

Why Microcredentials Matter in South Africa?

SA Context

System pressures driving microcredentials

“In South Africa, microcredentials are not a side project, they intersect with deep social and economic challenges.”

- Structural unemployment & skills mismatch.
- Need for reskilling / upskilling across the lifespan.
- Demand for flexible, short, targeted learning.

But...

- Highly regulated higher education system.
- Strong public accountability expectations



Definition of a microcredential

“No single, universally agreed definition”. Few examples:

Wits: “a **small volume of learning** (micro-learning) certified by a credential, **verifies, validates** and **attests** that **specific knowledge, skills,** and/or **competencies**, have been achieved”. **Offered by a university** or **recognised by a university** for **access and/or credit** towards a formal qualification through, for example, an RPL process. Wits (2021).

Australia: “a certification of **assessed learning** or **competency**, with a **minimum volume of learning** of **one hour and less** than an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) award qualification, that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of an AQF award qualification.” Australian Government .

New Zealand: “**small, stand-alone awards** that recognise the achievement of a specific set of **skills** and **knowledge** and are **quality assured** within the **national system**”. New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2024)



The National Qualifications Framework Anchor



SOUTH AFRICA'S STARTING POINT

National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as backbone designed for full qualifications, part-qualifications and formal programmes.



“Microcredentials sit uncomfortably between formal and non-formal courses and programmes.”



Microcredentials are challenging this logic in terms of size, flexibility, speed, occupational alignment and non-traditional learners.

Who Governs Micro-credentials in SA?



**A shared, evolving
policy space**



CHE – Quality
assurance &
standards



SAQA – NQF
alignment, credits,
articulation



DHET – Skills,
employability, lifelong
learning priorities



**Key approach taken
by the regulatory
bodies.**



Collaborative,
iterative, cautious



*“The risk is not under-
regulation or over-
regulation, it’s the
regulatory policy gap.”*



SA Policy Status – Progress & Gaps

What is emerging

The current uncertainty pushes institutions into a prototyping role.

Commitment towards quality & public accountability.

Alignment with existing QA principles and practices

International & regional learning (POMISA, State of Play)

What is unresolved

Credit-bearing vs non-credit bearing

Stackability

Consistency of assessment

Recognition by employers

Risk of duplication across institutions

The Wits case

Institutional rationale

Graduate employability

Lifelong learning

Industry-aligned skills

Complement, not replace, degrees

Approach

Quality-first, pilot-based

The University did not wait for regulation but did not abandon standards either.

Governance Approach at Wits

No parallel universe

Approval process follows the existing Senate structures (APDC)

Same quality culture as degrees

Formal approval & oversight

Quality principles

Clear learning outcomes

Rigorous assessment & moderation

Stakeholder relevance

Institutional accountability

Institutional Tensions Revealed Through Piloting

Key Challenges

The pilot phase exposed **structural tensions** that illuminate **practical limits of institutional agility** within regulated environments.

Governance Density

Approval processes designed designed for **full qualifications** constrained the the **responsiveness** micro-micro-credentials require.

Academic Incentives

Reward systems favouring favouring **traditional qualifications** and **research research** limited sustained sustained **momentum** for micro-credential development

Financial Viability

Costing exercises revealed revealed **sustainability challenges** under existing pricing models, **inseparable inseparable from quality considerations**.

Conceptual Slippage: MCs vs Repackaged Short Courses

Unintentionally **encouraged rebranding** rather than **re-design**. Schools treated MC as **smaller short courses, digitised workshops, credit-lite certificates**.

What we learned (Tensions, Risks and Insights)

The pilot revealed three core tensions

- Governance density vs agility Financial viability as quality
- Academic incentives & ownership

The QA dilemma “molasses effect”.

- Applying *full qualification logic* → slows innovation
- Removing QA safeguards → erodes trust
- Need for risk-sensitive, proportionate QA

Key Insights and lessons

- Over-engineering micro-credentials can defeat their purpose.
- Leveraging existing short courses (Wits Plus)
- Quality-enhanced recognition of existing provision
- Lower risk, higher sustainability
- Institutions are already shaping policy through practice
- QA continuity builds credibility — but must be proportionate
- Micro-credentials test how much trust our systems can carry

Strategic Insights and System-Level Implications



Institutional Agency

Universities function as **policy intermediaries**, **prototyping** quality assurance in advance of formal regulation.



Proportionality

Differentiated, risk-sensitive pathways pathways essential to **balance flexibility** with **accountability**.



System Coherence

Adaptive regulatory models supporting supporting **controlled experimentation experimentation** whilst maintaining public public trust.

The Wits experience demonstrates that **piloting generates valuable diagnostic insights** extending **beyond compliance** testing, **compliance** testing, informing **broader reflections** on **trust**, **proportionality**, and **quality assurance** design.

Discussion Questions

1. Does your national policy link micro-credentials to a national qualifications framework? Should it? What are the implications of *not* linking them?
2. What challenges to institutional cooperation on micro-credentials do you see or anticipate in your university?
 - Credit transfer?
 - Mutual recognition?
 - QA alignment?
 - Trust?

