

UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA

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# GUIDANCE FOR PORTABILITY OF AUSTRALIAN MICROCREDENTIALS

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## Acknowledgements

This document has been prepared by the Universities Australia Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic) Working Group on Microcredentials, with input from the wider committee of Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic).

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# GUIDANCE FOR PORTABILITY OF AUSTRALIAN MICROCREDENTIALS

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## INTRODUCTION

Microcredentials are an expanding alternative or additional form of qualification across higher education, vocational education, and training. Microcredentials attest to skills acquired or learning undertaken in a short, discrete formats, distinct from longer traditional qualifications such as diplomas and degrees.

A diverse range of organisations design, deliver and certify microcredentials, including universities and higher education providers, as well as non-traditional providers like corporations, professional bodies and others. There is no common definition or standard of what a microcredential is, which creates challenges for learners, institutions and other stakeholders. In recent higher education policy discourse, the novel qualification type of the ‘undergraduate certificate’, as well as the existing graduate certificate, have variously been labelled a ‘short course’ and a ‘microcredential’. For the purposes of this document, these qualification types are not considered to be microcredentials.

Although some other jurisdictions have more formally described microcredentials and their relationships to qualification frameworks, in Australia these qualifications are unregulated and sit outside the Australian Qualifications Framework. The lack of regulation provides space for providers to create innovative microcredential offerings that can quickly respond to the needs of learners, industry and others, but a lack of standardisation provides challenges for the recognition and portability of microcredentials for parties other than the issuing organisation.

Universities Australia is the peak body of Australia’s 39 comprehensive universities. Each of Universities Australia’s members is an autonomous, self-accrediting institution that makes and upholds its own policies, procedures and standards with respect to admission, certification and recognition of qualifications. Each institution is responsible for determining both how it will issue its own microcredentials and how it will recognise microcredentials issued by others, including for the purposes of academic credit and recognition of prior learning.

This guidance is intended to assist members in design and recognition of microcredentials, but notes that the responsibility for issuing and recognising microcredentials lies with each university individually.

## CONTEXT

Participation in post-secondary education has increased considerably, fostered by successive government policies to increase access. Alongside increased participation, the nature of work and economic activity is changing, with contemporary workers expected to work across multiple fields through multi-faceted careers.

Lifelong learning, where workers and learners ‘dip back’ into structured education to acquire contemporary knowledge and skills, is seen as an essential part of the modern economy. Learners may access complementary education for a variety of purposes, including ongoing professional development, reskilling, pathway qualifications, just-in-time acquisition of discrete packets of skills or knowledge, or personal development.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of the guidance provided in this document is to make microcredentials accessible and valuable for the widest possible cohort of learners by encouraging microcredential design that permits and encourages portability of credentials. Institutions should consider that learners are likely to access

lifelong learning from a variety of sources and will greatly value qualifications that are portable across a range of education and employment contexts. By designing microcredentials with a view to portability, providers can place the needs of learners at the centre of microcredential design.

The recommended standards are designed to help Australian universities and other education providers create microcredentials that will be easily recognised by other Australian universities. The guidance provided here should help learners, institutions, employers and other stakeholders quickly and easily understand what a microcredential attests. Clear information on the contents and likely portability of a microcredential will enable learners to make informed decisions about their learning journey that will best suit their circumstances and needs.

Agreed standards for information that is sufficient and predictable will encourage award of credit or broadening degree entry requirements between Australian higher education providers. Shared standards will also facilitate consideration of microcredentials from external providers.

## **SCOPE**

Universities understand that a wide range of alternative types of courses and credentials are offered by a variety of education and training providers. This guidance is primarily intended to guide development of microcredentials that could be recognised by Australian universities for the purposes of credit towards another qualification.

In some cases, other types of institutions such as TAFEs, professional organisations, training providers or other higher education institutions may consider it appropriate to use these guidelines to design credentials that will be easily recognisable by Australian universities. However, it is currently not possible or desirable for all alternative qualification types to be recognised by universities, and there will continue to be a range of qualification types to suit different purposes.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The recommended standards necessarily consider portability primarily amongst Australian institutions, for the benefit of Australian learners. Relationships with international qualification schema and/or industry credentials may be able to be articulated in the future. While use of the guidance in this document is voluntary and recognition of prior learning or credit will remain a decision for individual universities, it is the aim that microcredentials consistent with standards of portability will be able to be quickly and simply assessed for recognition by universities and other providers.

## **RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER INITIATIVES**

The guidance in this document has been developed alongside other the developments in Australian higher education micro credentials. A conceptual framework of the relationship between these developments is provided in the appendix.

The guidance provided in this document is primarily intended to aid course design and recognition of prior learning processes at Australian universities.

Other initiatives, such as the development of credential marketplaces and repositories, can use the guidance provided in this document to ensure that they promote and enhance portability of microcredentials amongst Australian higher education providers.

## **FUTURE DEVELOPMENT**

This document has been compiled based on a shared understanding of microcredentials at Australia's universities. Several issues currently lie beyond consensus and have been discussed at the end of the document. As the development of microcredentials in Australia progresses, this guidance may be updated to take account of new developments and better shared understanding.

## RECOMMENDED STANDARDS FOR MICROCREDENTIALS

The portability of microcredentials will be enhanced by the adoption of a set of minimum or baseline standards that enable easy evaluation of a credential by parties other than the issuer. Recommended standards focus on the minimum necessary standards to enable the rapid recognition of microcredentials by Australian universities.

Awards specified by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) are governed by the Higher Education Standards (HES) defined in the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (TESQA Act). Institutions may decide whether or not these standards apply to non-award courses including microcredentials. Decisions on course design, delivery, requirements and outcomes remain with individual institutions noting the desire to maintain space for innovation in a dynamic environment.

Alignment of recommended standards for microcredentials with the Higher Education Standards (HES) is desirable as the HES are used nationally and are well understood. Shared standards for microcredentials can support alignment with the HES and AQF.

The standards outlined below are principles-based. The principle behind each standard is discussed in more detail in the following pages.

### RECOMMENDED STANDARDS

1. Microcredentials have clear evidence of achievement or learning outcome;
2. Microcredentials have an understandable unit of exchange; and
3. Microcredentials are quality assured and verifiable, with sufficient, relevant metadata.

#### Alternative credentials

Globally, there are many variations of alternative forms of courses and qualifications, available from a wide range of providers. Some common names include microcredentials, badges, certificates, micromasters, massive open online courses (MOOCs), short courses and others. Although many of these courses aim to provide learners with some measure of knowledge or skills, not all of these courses can be recognised as credentials by universities.

Both recognisable microcredentials and other types of courses can blend innovative, highly scalable methods of instruction that provide accessible education to a wide range of learners and may have differing modes and levels of content delivery and assessment. Where a provider can attest that learners demonstrate robust evidence of achievement against clearly articulated learning outcomes, courses may satisfy these standards for recognisable, portable microcredentials. Where the issuing authority cannot fully attest to the achievement of the learner (for example, where no assessment takes place, or assessment takes place with little or no institutional quality control), then an alternative credential would not be a recognisable microcredential. Institutions should take care in their communications to avoid confusion amongst learners and other stakeholders about the nature of an offering.

# APPLICATION OF RECOMMENDED STANDARDS FOR MICROCREDENTIALS

The standards describe a set of minimum requirements for a microcredential to be recognised by Australian universities. The standards are principles-based. While not prescriptive as to form or content, credentials that fail to satisfy the three standards are unlikely to be recognised by other Australian universities. Further guidance describing core information, supporting information which may assist others to evaluate the credential, and possible forms of evidence is provided with respect to each element.

## STANDARD 1: MICROCREDENTIALS HAVE CLEAR EVIDENCE OF ACHIEVEMENT OR LEARNING OUTCOME.

*Principle: What does a learner know and is able to do on successful completion?*

Fundamentally, a credential or qualification attests that a learner has satisfactorily demonstrated that they have achieved learning outcomes or proficiencies. Issuers of credentials should ensure that credentials are associated with information that enables others to easily understand what knowledge, skills and attributes can be expected of a learner that has been issued with a microcredential. Issuers should also ensure that relevant information that provides evidence of student achievement against learning outcomes is provided.

Core information	Supporting information	Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Content<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– <i>theme/field</i></li><li>– <i>curriculum</i></li></ul></li><li>• Outcome:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– <i>knowledge,</i></li><li>– <i>skills: technical and/or transferable</i></li><li>– <i>relationship to relevant industry standard as appropriate</i></li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mode of delivery,</li><li>• Practical or clinical experience</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Curriculum documentation</li><li>• Summative assessment data</li><li>• Placement outcome</li><li>• Standardised testamur or attestation</li></ul>

## STANDARD 2: MICROCREDENTIALS HAVE AN UNDERSTANDABLE UNIT OF EXCHANGE

*Principle: What level and depth of learning is achieved?*

Learners are likely to draw on a range of sources and providers in their educational journey. Prior learning may be used to satisfy prerequisites for enrolment or be the basis for credit awarded towards degree completion. Accredited institutions must be satisfied that students have a reasonable chance of success and that graduates meet the learning outcomes of the award. To permit and enhance portability, a person (other than the issuer) must have a reasonable basis on which to determine the relative academic value or credit of a microcredential. Some providers already offer credit for microcredentials at an internally-consistent rate of exchange – for example, a microcredential may attract a number of credit points towards a larger qualification type. Some microcredentials may ‘stack’, whereas some may contribute towards ongoing professional development requirements.

Given the wide variety of schema for assigning credit to microcredentials and the variety of credentials available, a sector-wide system for denominating a common unit of exchange amongst providers is currently not feasible. However, to ensure portability, a microcredential should contain information about its unit of exchange that is understandable to others. Such information could include a description of how the credential fits into the issuer’s credit scheme, and how that scheme works (for example, an issuer could specify that the credential is worth two points, where a year’s full-time study at that provider is worth 100 points). In designing credentials, institutions should consider a minimum useful or manageable size for credit-bearing microcredentials.

At present, microcredentials are not formally captured by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Institutions may choose to align their microcredentials to the AQF, and should specify if they have done so.

Core information	Supporting information	Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volume of learning <i>(expressed as hours)</i></li> <li>• Depth of learning               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– AQF level and/or</li> <li>– industry standard where applicable</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship to AQF award courses, if relevant</li> <li>• Relationships to the issuer’s credit scheme (stackability)</li> <li>• Other dependencies               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– assumed prior competencies or</li> <li>– concurrent qualifications</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardised testamur or attestation</li> <li>• Curriculum documentation</li> <li>• Credit arrangements</li> </ul>



## STANDARD 3: MICROCREDENTIALS ARE QUALITY ASSURED AND VERIFIABLE, WITH SUFFICIENT, RELEVANT METADATA

*Principle: What assures validity and integrity of the credential?*

A microcredential is an attestation from an issuing authority that a learner has satisfactorily demonstrated the level of achievement specified by the credential. The utility of the attestation is inherently associated with the level of trust that learners, employers and other institutions have in the issuing authority.

Portability of microcredentials is enhanced when there is a high level of trust between the issuing authority and another body seeking to recognise the credential. Accredited higher education and further education institutions have nationally recognised validation of their award credentials or self-accrediting status creating high levels of trust between them. However, microcredentials are non-award credentials and institutions may apply alternative arrangements. Issuers may need to provide additional information about quality assurance measures where alternative schema for approval and oversight are employed.

Learners, employers and recognising institutions must also be satisfied as to the integrity of the credential. Issuers should provide information about its policies and processes to ensure that learner achievement is genuine and verified, and that the credential itself is verifiable. These properties should be inherent in the credential format and for digitally issued credentials, verification can be embedded in the metadata of the digital artefact.

Core information	Supporting information	Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issuing institution</li> <li>• Attestation of application of Higher Education Standards or description of alternative arrangement authorised by issuing institution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact details for issuing institution</li> <li>• Quality assurance arrangements (academic integrity, assessment)</li> <li>• Industry-relevant assurance arrangements</li> <li>• Information on credentialing engine</li> <li>• Provider and/or CRICOS codes</li> </ul>	<p>Statement of assurance of quality and integrity</p> <p>Metadata embeds:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>verification of learner identity</i></li> <li>• <i>verification of certification</i></li> </ul>

## ISSUES FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

In this version of guidance, several issues lie outside of the consensus of Universities Australia's members. These issues are flagged for discussion and future consideration, with development of future guidance to incorporate these issues.

### FORMAL LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Presently, microcredentials lie outside the AQF. The Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (2019) noted that microcredentials can be clearly distinguished from unassessed certificates of participation, but that inclusion of shorter-form qualifications into the AQF was likely to be premature. The review noted the wide variety of purposes and forms that microcredentials can take.

Formal linkage of microcredentials to the AQF may not suit all learners or providers in all circumstances. For example, a microcredential may be a very short, discrete block of technical learning that may not achieve suitable levels of depth and complexity for alignment with AQF bands. Similarly, fitting new and innovative microcredentials to the existing AQF may stifle innovation and not provide the complementary education pathways that some learners seek.

Universities and other providers may seek to align their credentials to the AQF, but it is not yet clear that the benefits of requiring alignment of microcredentials to the AQF would exceed economic and opportunity costs.

### STANDARDISED UNIT OF EXCHANGE

Ideally, an Australian microcredential could be described in terms of a standardised unit of credit or exchange, to provide learners with clear information that they can use to assess the value and likely outcomes of a credential for their circumstances.

However, microcredentials at Australian universities are in a range of states of development and maturity, and it may not be possible to assign a common unit of exchange to all microcredentials. Future developments may facilitate sectoral agreement on standardised credit and recognition of prior learning.

### RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PLATFORMS

A range of platforms for microcredentials exist around the world, and the value of Australian microcredentials will be maximised if they are portable in a range of contexts, including to global destinations.

In their design, institutions should consider how to maximise portability of credentials amongst a wide variety of global platforms, as well as maximising portability in the Australian context. However, alignment of credentials to overseas qualification frameworks may prove challenging to reconcile with domestic requirements and needs. Future work may be needed to ensure development of Australian microcredentials enhances and complements Australia's comparative advantages in educational offerings for both domestic and international students.

### FUTURE GUIDANCE

The working group has noted that microcredentials are an evolving area, both in international developments and domestic policy. Changes to guidance in light of future development of other initiatives, such as the Microcredentials Marketplace, National Credentials Platform and the review of the Australian Qualifications Framework will be considered as they occur.

## REFERENCES

The most important documents that the working group has considered are listed below:

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, European Training Foundation, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2019) [Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks 2019, volume II](#), European Training Foundation, accessed 23 July 2021

European Commission (2020) [A European approach to micro-credentials - output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group - final report](#), European Union, accessed 23 July 2021

Kato S, Galán-Muros V and Weko T (2020) [The emergence of alternative credentials](#), OECD Education Working Papers No. 216, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, accessed 23 July 2021

Noonan P, Blagaich A, Kift S, Lilly M, Loble L, More E and Persson M (2019) [Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework final report](#), Department of Education (Cth), accessed 23 July 2021

Oliver B (2019) [Making microcredentials work for learners, employers and providers](#) [PDF 1.7MB], Deakin University, accessed 23 July 2021

The working group also considered information provided by Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic) at a workshop on 26 May 2021, as well as institutional documents and frameworks for microcredentials.

## GLOSSARY

Term	Meaning
<b>AQF</b>	The Australian Qualifications Framework, which describes requirements for Australian tertiary qualification types. See <a href="https://www.aqf.edu.au/">https://www.aqf.edu.au/</a> .
<b>Award course</b>	A course of study that leads to an award specified by the Australian Qualifications Framework. This document focuses on higher education qualifications in the AQF.
<b>Course</b>	An organised set of classes, activities and/or resources designed to provide a learner with specific knowledge or skills. A course of study may or may not lead to the award of a credential or qualification.
<b>Credential</b>	An attestation that a learner has successfully completed a course of study to the satisfaction of the issuer.
<b>HESF</b>	The Higher Education Standards Framework, which describes requirements for registered higher education providers in Australia. Only registered providers may offer award courses, however a provider offering microcredentials is not required to comply with the HESF.
<b>Microcredential</b>	A novel type of qualification. Microcredentials are typically short and discrete courses that lead to the award of a self-described qualification, such as a 'badge' or 'certificate'. Microcredentials are currently not defined in the AQF.
<b>MOOC</b>	Massive open online course. MOOCs blend innovative teaching methods with highly scalable delivery. MOOCs do not necessarily lead to a credential or qualification.
<b>RPL</b>	Recognition of prior learning – the process by which an institution assesses the value of a learner's previous education. This may be for the purposes of satisfying prerequisites for a course, or to provide a learner with partial credit towards the completion of an award course.

## APPENDIX: EXAMPLE CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

