



MODULE 6

QA AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

PART 6.1 INTRODUCTION TO QA AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Block.ed E-learning Course

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Description

Have you ever wondered how learners, employers, and educational institutions can be sure that a microcredential is valuable, relevant, and trustworthy?

In this **first part of Module 6**, we will explore the essential role of Quality Assurance (QA) and Continuous Improvement (CI) in ensuring that microcredentials meet high standards—consistently and transparently.

This part of the module is designed to give you a clear understanding of the concepts of Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement, their significance for microcredentials, and how they are applied in this context.

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1. Welcome to the Module!

Have you noticed how microcredentials are changing the way we think about learning and skills? In today's fast-paced world, professionals need quick, targeted, and reliable learning opportunities. Microcredentials have stepped in to meet this demand. But how do we ensure these short-format courses maintain high standards and are trusted by learners, employers, and educational institutions alike?

That's where **Quality Assurance** (QA) and **Continuous Improvement** (CI) come into play. This module offers a deep dive into these two crucial processes, showing you how they safeguard quality and foster relevance in microcredential systems.

2. Understanding Microcredentials: Small Packages, Big Impact

Microcredentials are more than just short courses. They represent a shift in how learning is recognized and delivered. Designed to be flexible, modular, and stackable, microcredentials allow learners to build skills in specific areas without committing to long-term degree programs.

They serve various functions: upskilling and reskilling for workforce demands, supporting lifelong learning, offering personalized pathways to education and employment.

However, with this flexibility comes complexity. A variety of formats, providers, and quality levels have emerged, leading to concerns about consistency and recognition. That's where QA becomes essential.

3. Why QA Matters for Microcredentials

Imagine a world where every microcredential looked different, lacked clear outcomes, and had no evidence of quality. Would you trust it? Microcredentials are only as valuable as the trust they inspire. Trust among learners that their time and money are well spent; trust from employers that the skills signaled are real; and trust from institutions that credentials are comparable and recognizable.

Because microcredentials are highly diverse in providers, formats, and goals, QA ensures they remain credible, portable, and valuable.

More precisely, QA ensures that microcredentials are:

- Aligned with defined learning outcomes
- Delivered and assessed according to agreed-upon standards
- Transparent in purpose, design, and results

- Recognized across sectors and borders

Without QA, microcredentials risk being fragmented and non-comparable, undermining their legitimacy in broader educational and labor market systems.

4. What is Quality Assurance in Education?

In a nutshell, QA in education can be defined as a structured, systemic approach to maintaining and enhancing educational quality. It encompasses internal processes (like institutional self-assessment) and external mechanisms (like accreditation and peer review).¹

Core Elements of QA:

- **Transparency:** Clear information about course content, learning outcomes, and assessment
- **Accountability:** Defined roles for institutions, instructors, and learners
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Active involvement of learners, employers, and educators
- **Feedback and Evaluation:** Data-informed analysis to guide improvements

Frameworks like the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) provide guidance for institutions to design and implement QA systems that are fit for purpose.

“Robust quality assurance systems are critical to ensuring microcredentials are seen as reliable and worthy of recognition.” — Council 2022



Quality Assurance vs. Quality Control

While **quality control** focuses on checking the *output* (e.g., an assessment result), **quality assurance** is a proactive, *process-oriented* approach. It ensures quality is built into every step of the learning experience

¹ A more comprehensive definition describes quality assurance as: “An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgements through an agreed-upon and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal quality assurance (i.e., intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance (i.e., inter- or supra-institutional schemes)” (Vlăsceanu/Parlea 2007, 74)

5. QA for Microcredentials: What does it involve?

QA is not a standalone step but a thread that connects design, delivery, and recognition. Each component supports the overarching goal: ensuring that microcredentials are credible, transparent, and valuable to all stakeholders.

The figure below offers a simplified overview of how quality assurance is embedded throughout the microcredential development process.

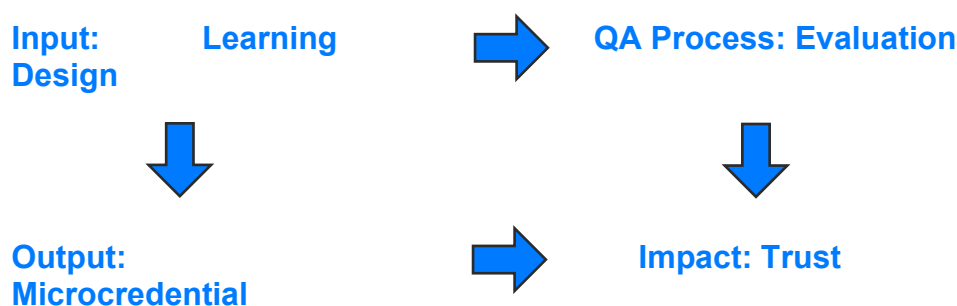


Figure 1 Quality Assurance Circle for Microcredentials

Let's break down the different parts:

1. **Input: Learning Design:** This stage focuses on how a microcredential is initially conceptualized and structured. Key components include:
 - Clearly defined **learning outcomes**
 - A curriculum that reflects real-world **skills and knowledge**
 - Well-structured **assessment methods** to evaluate whether learning objectives are met
2. **QA Process: Evaluation:** Quality Assurance happens alongside and after the design. It may involve:
 - **Peer review** by subject-matter experts
 - **External review** or alignment with national/international standards (like ESG or EQF)
 - Ongoing checks for **consistency**, **fairness**, and **transparency** in delivery and assessment
3. **Output: The Microcredential Itself:** This is the learner's result — the credential they earn. To be meaningful, it must:
 - Reflect **verified skills and competencies**

- Provide clear evidence of **successful assessment**
 - Include **metadata** such as learning outcomes, workload, and issuing institution
4. **Impact: Trust and Recognition:** A well-assured microcredential contributes to:
- **Learner confidence** in the value of their learning
 - **Employer recognition** and alignment with workforce needs
 - **Cross-border portability**, particularly when frameworks like EQF or MICROBOL principles are used

6. Microcredentials: QA Challenges in a New Landscape

While QA principles are well established in traditional education, applying them to microcredentials introduces new challenges:

- **Diverse providers:** Microcredentials may be offered by universities, companies, or independent platforms, each with different QA capacities.
- **Varied formats:** Online, hybrid, in-person; synchronous or asynchronous; assessed or not.
- **No universal recognition system:** Many countries lack frameworks that formally recognize microcredentials. Lack of common standards makes comparison and recognition difficult
- **Pace of innovation and scalability:** Traditional QA cycles may be too slow for rapidly evolving content. Existing QA systems designed for larger degree programmes may not fit smaller offerings.

These challenges call for adapted, flexible QA approaches that maintain rigour without stifling innovation.



EXAMPLE

Some microcredentials are offered online by tech companies, others by universities. Without a shared QA framework, how can employers judge their quality?

7. Continuous Improvement: Beyond Checking Boxes

The term **Continuous Improvement (CI)** highlights the fact that quality is not a one-time achievement or a fixed goal, but requires an ongoing commitment to improvement.



DEFINITION

Continuous Improvement refers to an iterative process of reflection and enhancement that improves educational quality over time

TIP

Think of continuous improvement as “Quality Assurance in Motion”

CI refers to all systematic efforts that are made to enhance all aspects of the learning experience. Rather than viewing QA as a compliance activity, CI emphasizes learning from feedback and adapting proactively.

CI supports microcredentials in staying relevant, up-to-date, and effective in delivering the promised learning outcomes.

Mechanisms that support CI include in particular

- Learner feedback loops: regular surveys and feedback sessions
- Peer and external review: encouraging benchmarking and accountability
- Curriculum updates: integrating industry trends and labor market shifts
- Data analytics: using learner performance and engagement data for course optimization



TIP

Consider setting up regular review cycles for your courses. Even a brief quarterly check-in with learners or instructors can uncover valuable insights.

8. Building Trust Through QA and CI

Microcredentials are increasingly being integrated into national qualification frameworks and lifelong learning strategies. However, their acceptance depends on transparent, accountable, and continuously improved QA processes.

Institutions can strengthen trust in their microcredentials by:

- Publishing clear QA policies
- Collaborating with employers in design and review
- Using open standards for digital credentialing (e.g., Open Badges)
- Documenting learning outcomes in a structured format.
- Referring to established (sectoral, national or international) quality frameworks and standards, such as
 - **ESCO**, the European classification of Skills, Competences and Occupations.
 - **EQF**, the European learning outcomes-based framework for all types of qualifications
 - **ENQA** Quality Assurance Standards (ENQA, 2015)
 - **DigCompEdu** framework for assuring digital teaching quality
 - **The European Principles** for the design and issuance of microcredentials (Council, 2022)



EXAMPLE

Cross-institutional initiatives such as the **MICROBOL** project are also developing QA frameworks specifically for microcredentials, aiming to support mutual recognition and cross-border trust in Europe and beyond.

<https://microbol.microcredentials.eu/>

9. Looking Ahead: Digital Tools and Policy Trends

Digital transformation is influencing QA practices, too. From AI-driven analytics to blockchain-secured credentials, technology offers new opportunities to monitor, verify, and improve quality.

Emerging Trends include

- Learning analytics for real-time feedback
- Blockchain to secure and verify credentials
- Digital QA dashboards to monitor performance across courses

- Cross-border policy alignment, e.g., through the European Approach to Microcredentials (European Commission 2022)

As microcredentials grow in strategic importance, QA and CI will be essential for their **sustainability, scalability, and systemic integration**.

10. For Reflection



Take a moment to reflect on the following

1. Think about microcredentials offered in your country or institution. Are there clear QA mechanisms in place? How are they communicated to learners and employers?
2. Where do you see opportunities for improvement in your institution's QA practices?
3. How can continuous improvement become a structured part of your course development?
4. What tools or frameworks could you implement to enhance the recognition of microcredentials?

You have now completed the theoretical part of this module. In the second part, we will have a closer look at how QA is implemented in practice.

11. References

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