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The State of Play of Microcredentials:

Belgium/Flanders



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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASO	General secondary education
BSO	Vocational secondary education
EC	European Commission
ECTS	European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ESGs	European Standards and Guidelines
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EU	European Union
EVC	Erkennen van Verworven Competenties
EVK	Erkenning van Verworven Kwalificaties
FQF	Flemish Qualifications Framework
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
KSO	Artistic secondary education
LED	Learning Experiences Database
MC	Microcredential
NUFFIC	Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PES	Public Employment Services
PIAAC	Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PoMiSA	Potential of microcredentials in Southern Africa
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TSO	Technical secondary education
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
UAntwerpen	University of Antwerp
UGent	Ghent University
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VLOR	Flemish Education Council
VUB	Vrije Universiteit Brussel



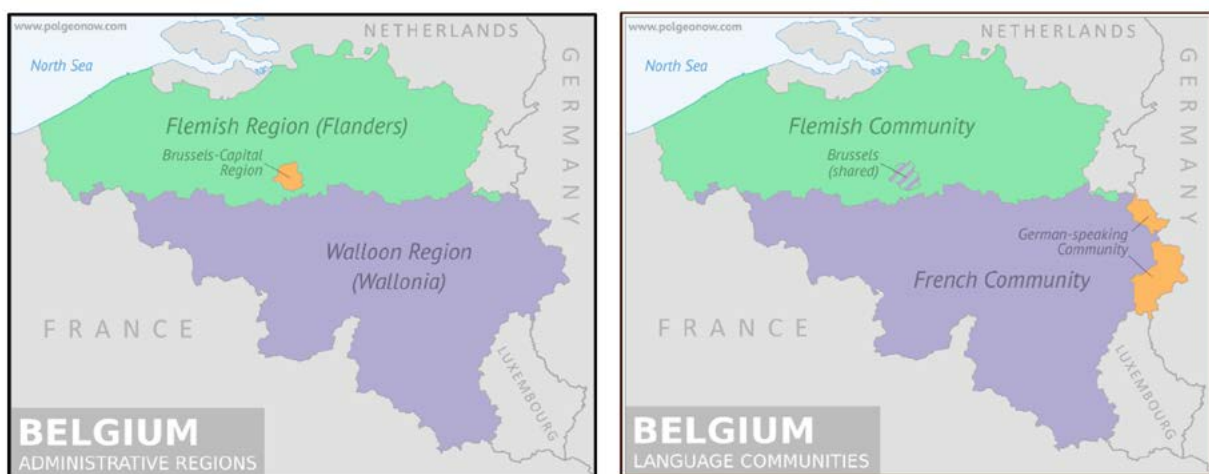
BELGIUM/FLANDERS: OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

Governance and structure of Belgium and Flanders

Belgium's state structure is a federal system, consisting of various administrative levels that share powers and each have their specific responsibilities. This structure is the result of several state reforms that have taken place since the 1970s, gradually transferring powers to the regions and communities.

The country is composed of three regions (Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital) and three communities (Flemish, French, and German-speaking). The federal government, communities, and regions each have specific responsibilities, with the federal government focusing on national matters such as defence, justice, and social security. Communities and regions have significant autonomy in areas like education and employment.

Figure 1: Administrative structures in Belgium



Left: Regions: Flemish Region, Walloon Region, and Brussels-Capital Region

Right: Communities: Flemish Community, French, and German-speaking

Division of Powers

- ▶ **Federal Government:** Responsible for national affairs such as justice, social security, and labour law.
- ▶ **Communities:** The communities are organised around language and culture, and their competences mainly cover person-related matters. They are responsible for areas such as education, culture, health (not including social security), welfare, and child protection.
- ▶ Education falls under the communities' authority. This means that the education systems in Flanders, the French-speaking Community, and the German-speaking

Community are each managed by their respective community. They determine educational frameworks, legislation and the funding of educational institutions.

- ▶ **Regions:** The regions are responsible for territorially bound matters such as the economy, spatial planning, the environment, housing, infrastructure, and employment. Employment is a regional competence. This means the regions manage labour market policies, including job placement services and organising training for jobseekers. Each region develops its own initiatives and strategies to promote employment.

Education and Employment

In Flanders, both education and employment fall under the authority of the regional government. This means that the Flemish government shapes the policy in these domains, which are closely linked to lifelong learning and the development of microcredentials.

From this point forward, this report will focus solely on the situation in Flanders, which may differ from policies and practices in other regions of Belgium.

Structure of the Flemish Education System

Early Childhood Education and Primary Education

- ▶ Pre-primary education (for children aged 2.5 to 6) is not compulsory but widely attended and fully integrated into the school system.
- ▶ Primary education is for children aged 6 to 12 and is compulsory.

Secondary Education

Secondary education in Flanders starts at age 12 and is divided into three cycles of two years each. Students can choose between general education, technical education, vocational education and training (VET), and artistic education.

- ▶ **General secondary education (ASO):** Focuses on academic subjects and prepares students for higher education.
- ▶ **Technical secondary education (TSO):** Combines general education with technical training and can lead to either higher education or the labour market.

- ▶ **Vocational secondary education (BSO):** Primarily geared towards immediate entry into the workforce, with some students continuing in tertiary education or post-secondary vocational programmes.
- ▶ **Artistic secondary education (KSO):** Provides a combination of general and artistic subjects, preparing students for higher education in the arts or related fields.

At the end of secondary education, students can earn a diploma that grants access to higher education if they follow ASO, TSO, or KSO, while BSO students may pursue specific vocational post-secondary options.

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

- ▶ **Secondary Level VET:** Offered within the technical (TSO) and vocational (BSO) tracks. Students engage in a mix of classroom learning and practical training, often in collaboration with industry.
- ▶ **Dual Learning:** Introduced in recent years, it allows students to combine school-based education with work-based learning through apprenticeships.
- ▶ **Post-Secondary VET:** Includes additional training at specialised centres, adult education institutions, or Syntra networks for entrepreneurial training. The goal of VET in Flanders is to align education more closely with the labour market, ensuring that students develop practical, employable skills.

Higher Education Flanders offers higher education through universities and universities of Applied Sciences (hogescholen). The system follows the Bologna Process, with these degree programmes¹:

¹ *Higher education in Flanders - Study in Flanders.* (2024, September.). <https://www.studyinlanders.be/higher-education-in-flanders>

- ▶ An associate degree (90-120 ECTS) is a practice-based programme between secondary education and a professional bachelor's degree (European Qualification Framework level 5). Workplace learning accounts for at least a third of the study load and it prepares you in two years for the labour market or for a professional bachelor's programme. Flemish universities of applied sciences (and arts) offer associate degrees only in Dutch.
- ▶ A professional bachelor's degree (180 ECTS) is a bachelor's degree combining general knowledge with practical competences, including compulsory internships. It prepares you for the labour market in three years. Exception: a bachelor's degree in nursing takes four years (240 ECTS). If you want to proceed studying for a master's degree at a Flemish university, a bridging programme will be required.
- ▶ An academic bachelor's degree (180 ECTS) is a bachelor's degree offered at a university, a school of arts or the Antwerp Maritime Academy. It has a strong theoretical focus and prepares you for master's studies.
- ▶ An advanced bachelor's degree (60 ECTS) is a bachelor's degree offered at a university of applied sciences. It provides you with wider and more specialised knowledge and competences in your field of study.
- ▶ A master's degree (60-120 ECTS) has a strong focus on advanced scientific or artistic knowledge and research competences. Most English taught programmes in Flemish higher education are at master's level.
- ▶ An advanced master's degree (60-120 ECTS) offers specialised training, often linked to top research areas of the home university and is aimed at students who already earned an initial master's degree.

- ▶ A PhD is a doctoral degree, awarded to students who complete a research thesis offering a new contribution to knowledge in their subject. Each Flemish university has several doctoral schools offering PhD programmes preparing PhD graduates for a career in both academia and beyond. For PhD programmes please contact the university of your choice directly (see links below).

Employment

The Flemish government also oversees employment policy, including labour market programmes, job placement services, and training aimed at improving workforce employability. Flanders works closely with social partners, businesses, and training centres in this area.

Lifelong Learning in Flanders

Lifelong learning is a key policy priority in Flanders, involving both the education and employment sectors. To strengthen lifelong learning, the **Lifelong Learning Partnership** was established in 2020 as part of the Flemish government agreement. This partnership, which includes a wide range of stakeholders from both the education and employment fields, was tasked with developing an action plan for a "learning society." The action plan, approved by the Flemish government in December 2021², outlines concrete measures to promote lifelong learning and to prepare Flanders for the rapidly changing job market.

The Lifelong Learning Partnership is a crucial mechanism for enhancing cooperation between education and employment sectors and for building a learning society in Flanders.

2 *Action plan on lifelong learning. Setting sail for a learning Flanders.* (2021, December). Vlaanderen. Geraadpleegd op 4 september 2024, van <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/action-plan-on-lifelong-learning-setting-sail-for-a-learning-flanders>

Environmental Analysis of Lifelong Learning in Flanders

The environmental analysis in the “Action Plan on Lifelong Learning” of the Lifelong Learning Partnership outlines several key challenges for lifelong learning in Flanders:

- ▶ **Participation in Lifelong Learning:** The majority of adults (63.4%) in Flanders participate in informal learning, followed by 44.4% engaging in non-formal learning, and only 6.8% in formal learning. Compared to other European countries, Flanders ranks low, especially in formal learning, where it is below the European average.³
- ▶ **Unequal Participation:** Training participation is unevenly distributed, with older adults, lower-qualified individuals, and the non-working population showing lower involvement. Flanders also struggles with functional illiteracy, with 15% of adults being low-literate or functionally illiterate⁴.
- ▶ **Barriers to Learning:** The primary barriers to learning differ by demographic. For example, highly qualified workers and younger adults (25–34) cite time constraints, whereas older adults, the unemployed, and lower-qualified individuals report more dispositional (such as negative experiences in initial education) and institutional (such as lack of employer support and the proximity of available training programmes) barriers.

- ▶ **Cultural Issues:** The OECD’s Skills Strategy indicates that Flanders lacks a strong learning culture. A significant percentage of the population (41.9%) is not engaged in lifelong learning and does not intend to participate, especially amongst those with lower education levels.

Summary

Education and employment fall under the competence of the Flemish government, and these areas play a vital role in lifelong learning policy. Through initiatives such as the Lifelong Learning Partnership and the Action plan for a learning society, Flanders aims to support its citizens in continuous development and to help them adapt to the evolving demands of the labour market.

The environmental analysis in the “Action Plan on Lifelong Learning” of December 2021 reveals several critical challenges for lifelong learning in Flanders. Participation rates in lifelong learning, particularly formal learning, remain low compared to European standards. Older adults, lower-qualified individuals, and the non-working population face notable barriers. Furthermore, Flanders’ lack of a strong learning culture, as indicated by the high percentage of the population disengaged from learning, underscores the need for targeted strategies to promote inclusivity and foster a lifelong learning mindset across all sectors of society.

3 OECD (2019), *OECD Skills Strategy Flanders: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264309791-en>.

4 Cincinnato, S., De Meyer, I., & Vakgroep Onderwijskunde. (z.d.). VAARDIG GENOEG VOOR DE 21STE EEUW? De eerste Vlaamse resultaten bij PIAAC. In *Vakgroep Onderwijskunde* (p. 3). <https://piaac.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Volledige-Vlaamse-rapport-van-het-PIAAC-onderzoek-cyclus-1.pdf>



**ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF
PLAY OF MICROCREDENTIALS
IN BELGIUM/FLANDERS**

1. MICROCREDENTIAL CONCEPTUALISATION

1.1. What are the key political, economic, social and technological drivers and attractors for adopting microcredentials in Belgium/Flanders?

Based on the reports of the Flemish Educational Council⁵ and the action plan for lifelong learning in Flanders the following political, economic, social and technological drivers and attractors for adopting microcredentials in Belgium/Flanders can be identified:

Political Drivers

- ▶ **Increasing participation** in further education to 60% by 2030 (a target set by the European Union)⁶.
- ▶ **The need to align** with the European Council's recommendation on a European approach to microcredentials for lifelong learning and employability. To strengthen lifelong learning, the Council recommends that member states adopt a European approach to microcredentials, particularly by applying a common EU definition, EU standards, and key principles for the design and issuance of microcredentials.
- ▶ **Regulatory Framework:** Embedding the term and definition of microcredentials into legislation should ensure a shared understanding and awareness across sectors and enhance the potential of microcredential recognition and portability.

Economic Drivers

- ▶ **Labour Market Needs:** Microcredentials provide flexible solutions to rapidly changing labour market demands. The labour market is changing rapidly, with increasing demand for highly qualified workers in knowledge professions on the one hand, and a growing number of vacancies for shortage occupations on the other (De Smet et al., 2021; De Vos et al., 2021).

In 2023, 15.1% of employed individuals aged 20 to 64 in Flanders worked in healthcare and social services, and 13.4% in the industrial sector, making these the sectors with the highest share of workers. The top five sectors were completed by wholesale and retail trade (12.4%), education (9.6%), and public administration, defense, and social security (7.1%).

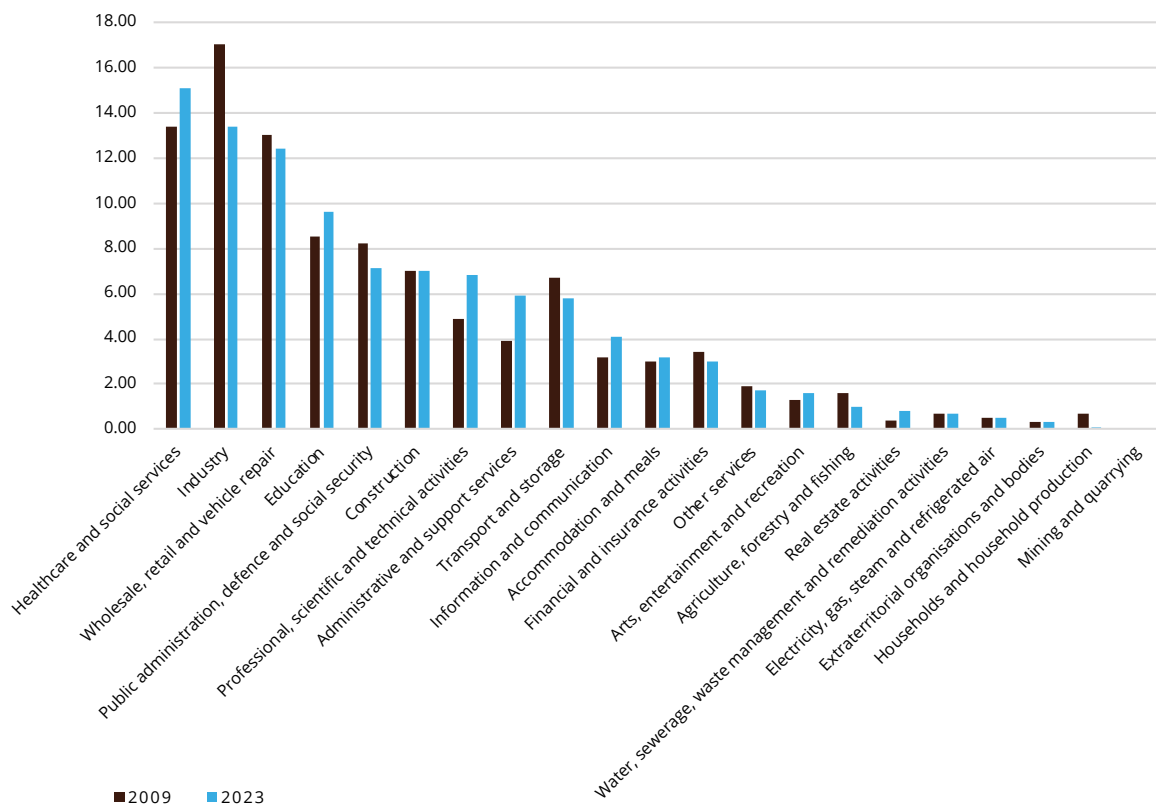
Between 2009 and 2023, the administrative and support services sector saw the largest increase (+2.0 percentage points), followed by professional, scientific, and technical activities (+1.9 ppt.) and healthcare and social services (+1.7 ppt.). The largest declines occurred in the industrial sector (-3.9 ppt.) and in public administration, defense, and social security (-1.1 ppt.).

- ▶ **Inclusive Employment:** Microcredentials offer improved access to education and training for vulnerable groups, enhancing their employability.

5 Microcredentials als instrument om levenslang en levensbreed leren te stimuleren. (2023.). Vlor. <https://www.vlor.be/adviezen/microcredentials-als-instrument-om-levenslang-en-levensbreed-leren-te-stimuleren>

6 Education and Training Monitor 2021 (europa.eu)

Figure 2: Employed persons aged 20 to 64 by economic sector, Flemish Region, 2009 and 2023, in %



Social Drivers

- ▶ **Lifelong Learning:** Supporting lifelong learning, helping individuals grow both personally and professionally.
- ▶ **Inclusivity:** Making education and training more accessible to a wide range of learners. Training participation is very unevenly distributed in Flanders. Irrespective of the reference period taken into account, over 55s, the low-qualified, and the non-working population are less likely to participate in training. This effect (in Flanders referred to as the Matthew effect) is, therefore, a focal point for several researchers (OECD, 2019/2021; Van Langenhove et al., 2020; Martin, 2018). Lifelong learning is particularly important for vulnerable groups. Training participation also differs by company size and sector of employment (Van Langenhove et al., 2020). Participation in job-related (non-)formal training is lower in

smaller companies and among adults with temporary contracts (OECD, 2019).

Technological Drivers

Microcredentials offer the flexibility to keep up with the rapid pace of technological advancements. Robotisation, as well as the digital, technological and green revolutions, are leading to certain professions becoming less important (Oppenheimer, 2019). According to the OECD Skills Strategy, 14% of current jobs in Flanders have a high chance of being automated, while another 29% of jobs are facing significant changes due to automation. It is also difficult to predict which professions will be most in demand in ten years' time and which sectors will undergo the greatest changes. Responding to digital and green transitions will also require specific technical competencies, including STEM competencies (Roland Berger, 2021) and digital skills (OECD, 2021).

1.2. How do these drivers and attractors align with current educational and workforce trends?

As mentioned by the Flemish Educational Council in its advice of 26 October 2023, “Micro-credentials in Flanders - Advice on the ‘Recommendation on a European approach to microcredentials for lifelong learning and employability’ of the Council of the EU”, the above-mentioned drivers have created a climate for adopting microcredentials in Flanders. This climate has resulted in a number of educational and workforce trends which can be observed and which underpin the potential of a broader uptake and acceptance of microcredentials.

Educational Trends

- ▶ **Modular Learning:** A shift towards flexible, shorter learning modules that can be stacked towards larger qualifications.
- ▶ **Recognition of Prior Learning:** An emphasis on validating and accrediting informal and non-formal learning experiences.

Workforce Trends

- ▶ **Skills-Based Hiring:** An increasing focus on hiring based on specific skills rather than traditional degrees.
- ▶ **Continuous Upskilling:** Growing need for workers to continuously update their skills to keep pace with technological advancements and changing job requirements.

1.3. How are microcredentials defined and understood by various stakeholders (educational institutions, students, employers, policymakers) in Belgium/Flanders?

In 2022, the Council of the EU finalised its recommendation on microcredentials, titled the “Recommendation on a European approach to microcredentials for lifelong learning and employability”⁷. The recommendation includes a joint definition of microcredentials, along with accompanying standards and standard elements.

The following definition is proposed in the recommendation (p. 13):

Microcredential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences leading to microcredentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs.

Microcredentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.

In addition to the definition, the Council of the EU identifies the following standard elements that are part of the definition and thus serve to describe a microcredential (p. 16):

1. identification of the learner
2. title of the micro-credential
3. country(ies)/region(s) of the issuer
4. awarding body(ies)
5. date of issuing
6. learning outcomes
7. notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS, wherever possible)

7 Council of the European Union. (2022). Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.

8. level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (European Qualifications Framework, Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area), if applicable
9. type of assessment
10. form of participation in the learning activity
11. type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential

The European definition is very broad, and although there is consensus that this definition will continue to be used in Flanders, it has not yet been legally enshrined. The VLOR⁸ is advocating for the definition to be legally established. Enshrining the definition in law would not only promote a shared understanding but also increase the general awareness of the term microcredential.

This awareness is crucial. It allows learners to understand the role of a microcredential within the broader lifelong learning landscape and informs educational institutions and training providers on how to offer microcredentials. Employers also gain a better understanding of the value of a microcredential. In this way, the term microcredential could become more widely recognised and ultimately realise its full potential.

In Belgium/Flanders, microcredentials are understood by various stakeholders as follows⁹:

Educational Institutions

The regulatory framework for higher education in Flanders has been extensively flexibilized since 2005, allowing part of the offerings to fully meet the European definition of microcredentials. Consequently, many higher education institutions already offer microcredentials, even though Flanders still

lacks a formal framework and regulatory embedding of the term.

The term “microcredentials” is used in two distinct ways.

First, it often refers to the evidence of learning obtained after a learning activity, resulting in a credential, i.e., a microcredential is “acquired.” Second, the term is also used to describe the learning activity itself that precedes the acquisition of the certificate, i.e., one “follows” or “is enrolled in” a microcredential. Although this latter usage is well established, it does not fit within the European definition, which emphasises the ‘proof of learning outcomes.’ Nonetheless, both interpretations are interrelated.

Educational institutes, particularly in higher education, consider microcredentials as modular, short-term qualifications that complement traditional degrees, offering flexibility in learning pathways, especially for lifelong learners. Additionally, educational and training providers can respond more swiftly and effectively to labor market or societal demands through microcredentials. They also enhance the accessibility of existing programs for lifelong learners.

Some universities of applied sciences in Flanders have begun using the term “microdegree” to refer to a programme that bundles several course units, leading to a certificate.

Outside of higher education, the term is much less known, and there is not yet a wide range of offerings available.

Learners

Feedback from participants in microcredentials at UGent indicates that they perceive microcredentials as opportunities to quickly acquire specific skills, enhance employability,

8 Microcredentials als instrument om levenslang en levensbreed leren te stimuleren. (2023.). Vlor. <https://www.vlor.be/adviezen/microcredentials-als-instrument-om-levenslang-en-levensbreed-leren-te-stimuleren>

9 Microcredentials in Europees perspectief. (2021). Vlor. <https://www.vlor.be/adviezen/microcredentials-europees-perspectief>

and adapt to changing career demands. They also find them useful for personal development, learning out of interest, exploring new fields, or reorienting their careers. In terms of content, microcredentials score highly; however, additional attention from institutions is needed regarding the support for lifelong learners—particularly in the context of returning to education after a significant break and balancing work, learning, and family commitments.

Employers

Value microcredentials for verifying specific competencies and ensuring that employees possess relevant, up-to-date skills, supporting both upskilling and reskilling. Microcredentials also have the potential to work more demand-driven. They allow for better alignment of the offering with the needs of the learner and potentially even towards a more personalised offering.

In Flanders, the concept of microcredentials is gaining recognition, and for employers, the guarantee of quality and official credits is becoming increasingly important.

Policymakers

Recognise microcredentials as tools to promote lifelong learning, address skills gaps, and enhance the education system's responsiveness to labour market needs.

1.4. How do/could stakeholders' views on microcredentials impact their practical implementation?

Educational Institutions

- ▶ Their support is crucial for ensuring quality assurance and aligning with existing educational standards.
- ▶ Collaboration with industry could ensure the relevance and recognition of microcredentials.

Example:

VUB, UAntwerp and Ghent University are working together in the field of lifelong learning by setting up Nova Academy. Under the motto "*Bringing learning to life*", the three universities want to strengthen lifelong learning in Flanders. One of the projects focused on policy and framework design, quality assurance, and communication regarding microcredentials.

Students

- ▶ Demand for flexible and accessible learning options could push institutions to offer more microcredential programs, potentially stackable into larger units of learning.

Employers

- ▶ Endorsement and utilisation in hiring practices could enhance the credibility and acceptance of microcredentials in the job market.

Policymakers

- ▶ Development of policies and practices that support microcredentials, including targeted funding and quality assurance, is essential for their successful implementation and sustainability.

Summary

The adoption of the European definition and the approaches put forward in the European Recommendation, which can be applied across sectors, offer the possibility to cater for the political, social, economic and technological challenges in Flanders and are in line with the trends in both education and the workforce.

Figure 3: Information to the general public about microcredentials on the Nova Academy platform¹⁰








Micro-credentials



With the growing need for lifelong learning, new forms of continuing education are starting to emerge. In addition to postgraduate programmes, lectures and study days, micro-credentials are perhaps the best answer to this increasing need.

[See all micro-credentials](#)

Frequently asked questions

	What is a micro-credential?	▼
	What is the difference with bachelor's or master's programmes?	▼
	Do you need a degree to enrol?	▼
	What advantages do micro-credentials offer?	▼
	Why choose micro-credentials?	▼
	How much does it cost to enrol in a micro-credential?	▼
	Can the lesson times be combined with work and private life?	▼

¹⁰ [Micro-credentials | Nova Academy \(nova-academy.be\)](https://nova-academy.be)

2. PUBLIC & PRIVATE SECTOR MICROCREDENTIAL PROVIDERS

2.1. What is the current/projected role of public and private sector providers of microcredentials in Belgium/Flanders?

In Belgium/Flanders 'Providers of microcredentials' means education and training institutions and organisations, social partners (i.e. 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 microcredentials for formal, non-formal and informal learning. This is without prejudice to regional and national legislation and circumstances.

2.2. What benefits do/could users gain from microcredentials offered by these providers?

The Council of the EU¹¹ refers to the following (potential) benefits of microcredentials:

- ▶ improve access to education and training for all learners (including vulnerable groups)
- ▶ offer flexible learning pathways (including transition between different educational levels)
- ▶ integrate microcredentials into and complement qualifying training;
- ▶ develop skills of learners (including digital skills);
- ▶ support learning in the context of the green transition;

- ▶ have a positive impact on the economy at local and regional level;
- ▶ promote professional development of teachers, trainers and staff in general;
- ▶ encourage transfer of research results towards learning opportunities;
- ▶ counter discriminatory stereotypes.

2.3. What variations exist in the needs of microcredential users across formal, non-formal and informal education sectors?

In its advice of 26 October 2023 "Micro-credentials in Flanders - Advice on the 'Recommendation on a European approach to microcredentials for lifelong learning and employability' of the Council of the EU"¹², the Flemish Education Council (VLOR) states:

"The EU Council also wants to support the development of micro-credentials in non-formal and informal settings wherever possible. Even in those forms of learning, it remains crucial for the Flemish Education Council to maintain the standard elements that characterise and define a micro-credential."

This means that variations (across formal, non-formal and informal education sectors) may exist as long as they are in line with the standard elements as defined by the aforementioned recommendation (cf. 2.3). Private providers can also offer microcredentials as long as they comply with the European definition and standard elements.

11 Council of the European Union. (2022). Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.

12 Microcredentials als instrument om levenslang en levensbreed leren te stimuleren. (2023.). Vlor. <https://www.vlor.be/adviezen/microcredentials-als-instrument-om-levenslang-en-levensbreed-leren-te-stimuleren>

Summary

The role of public and private sector providers of microcredentials in Belgium and Flanders is diverse, encompassing a wide range of actors including educational institutions, social partners, employers, civil society, and government bodies. These providers contribute to formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts, in accordance with regional and national legislation. The potential benefits of microcredentials are numerous, ranging from increased access to education and flexible learning pathways to fostering skills development and supporting the green transition. Importantly, microcredentials can positively impact local and regional economies,

promote professional development, and combat discriminatory stereotypes.

The needs of microcredential users may vary across the formal, non-formal, and informal education sectors. However, the Flemish Education Council emphasizes that regardless of the learning context, the standard elements that define a microcredential should remain consistent. This ensures a cohesive approach that aligns with the EU Council's recommendations, while allowing for flexibility and adaptability across different educational settings.

3. MICROCREDENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION & EFFECTIVENESS

3.1. What criteria would indicate that microcredentials effectively meet their envisaged educational and vocational objectives in Belgium/Flanders?

Currently, a uniform registration of microcredentials is not possible. There is a political consensus that consideration will be given to how this situation can be adjusted so that a uniform registration of microcredentials becomes possible, in the first place as part of the so-called "Higher education database" containing a register of all recognized higher education qualifications. This information can then flow to the "LED database" (in which the L stands for "learning" and the E for "experiences"), which provides at the level of all citizens an overview of all their recognized formal, informal and non-formal learning experiences. The inclusion of microcredentials in these databases are hence important criteria to indicate that microcredentials effectively

meet their envisaged educational and vocational objectives.

Other criteria that could indicate that microcredentials effectively meet their envisaged educational and vocational objectives in Belgium/Flanders is a lower number of lower-qualified individuals and an increased participation of the non-working population in learning.

3.2. To what extent are the socio-economic impacts of microcredentials being considered, particularly regarding access, equity, and inclusion in Belgium/Flanders?

The current state of affairs of microcredentials in Flanders does not allow us to find sources to underpin to what extent there are socio-economic impacts of microcredentials, particularly regarding access, equity, and

inclusion in Belgium/Flanders. It is however very clear from all internal discussions between higher education stakeholders that microcredentials should not become substitutes for full degrees.

Although the potential of microcredentials for Flemish society at large goes beyond its current implementation (i.e. within higher education and especially in the framework of lifelong learning, so particularly focusing on reskilling and upskilling already highly qualified and working individuals), there is at this moment no clear evidence that there is discussion of the potential of microcredentials for those who are underserved in the formal education system, e.g. lower-qualified individuals and non-working population, or for those who leave the workforce at a (too) early stage. Within higher education the use of microcredentials is also not particularly focused on the enhancement of including more learners from underserved groups in education, partially this has been a strong focus on higher education at large over the last decades already.

3.3. How do industries respond to and/or recognise microcredentials, and what challenges and opportunities does this present?

The current state of affairs of microcredentials in Flanders does not allow us to find sources on how industries respond to or recognise microcredentials, let alone what challenges and opportunities this presents.

This does however not mean that those (higher education) institutions that have been invested in creating microcredentials have not done this in cooperation with industry or representatives from society at large. These contacts have definitely influenced the contents of microcredentials as well as modes of provision as to tailor these to industry needs. But both the provision and recognition of microcredentials have largely remained at the level of higher education institutions.

3.4. What key factors are most likely to positively or negatively influence the implementation, impact and long-term sustainability of microcredentials?

Positive Influences

- ▶ **Policy Support:** Strong support from policymakers, including clear regulatory frameworks and sustainable funding, can facilitate the widespread adoption and integration of microcredentials.
- ▶ **Industry Collaboration:** Partnerships between educational institutions and industry can ensure that microcredentials remain relevant and valued in the job market.
- ▶ **Quality Assurance:** Implementing robust quality assurance measures can build trust in the value of microcredentials among all stakeholders.
- ▶ **Flexibility and Accessibility:** Ensuring that microcredentials are flexible and accessible to a wide range of learners, including those in non-traditional education paths, will enhance their impact.

Example

During the past years, the development of new microcredentials in higher education in Flanders were very much linked to a financial impulse given by the Flemish government in 2021 to innovate the study programmes from higher education institutions and to intensify their offer for lifelong learning opportunities. Funding for two years is provided by this so-called Voorsprongfonds (Higher Education Advancement Fund). Within this fund, higher education institutions collaborate during 2022 and 2023 on several projects of blended and online learning, lifelong learning and making study programmes more future-proof. This was on top of the regular HE funding mechanisms.

As a result of the Higher Education Advancement Fund, two initiatives have been further developed: Nova Academy and Continue.

Nova Academy

For Nova Academy three Flemish Universities joined forces in building a joint portal website, providing information on lifelong learning opportunities after graduation. The University of Antwerp, Ghent University and VUB started the Nova academy portal, in which microcredentials have a distinct place. Visitors can find information on the offer, and are directed to the university's website for further information. This portal brings together learning opportunities of three universities. Visitors can find information on the offer and on the definition and relevance of microcredentials and are directed to the university's website for further information.

<https://nova-academy.be/en/about-nova-academy>

Continue

Continue is the lifelong learning network of the KU Leuven Association at 23 locations in Flanders and Brussels. It is a joined initiative of the University of Leuven and 8 universities of applied sciences, where they jointly present their LLL offer.

<https://www.continue.be/>

Negative Influences

- ▶ Lack of Recognition: If microcredentials are not widely recognized or valued by employers, their utility and appeal will be limited.
- ▶ Insufficient Funding: Without adequate and sustainable funding, the development and maintenance of high-quality microcredential programs will be challenging.
- ▶ Complexity in Implementation: Overly complex administrative and regulatory requirements could hinder the effective rollout and integration of microcredentials
- ▶ Equity Concerns: If microcredentials are not designed and implemented with equity in mind, they could exacerbate existing inequalities rather than mitigate them.

Summary

The current state of affairs regarding the implementation of microcredentials in Flanders does not allow yet to complete the picture on its impact and effectiveness. However, as different cases of microcredential implementation at various higher education institutions show, it is clear that even without an explicit regulatory framework there is a lot institutions can do already on the basis of a generally accepted definition and standard elements (in our case: the European ones) and an open and facilitating already existing legal framework.

4. MICROCREDENTIALIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

4.1. How is/should quality assurance (be) managed for microcredentialials in Belgium/Flanders?

In managing the quality of microcredentialials, education stakeholders in Belgium/Flanders have agreed that sufficient attention must be paid to the diversity of educational institutions and providers, as well as to the various forms of microcredentialials. The flexibility inherent in the concept is a key strength that must be preserved. At the same time, the application of the definition (including standard elements) must ensure quality for learners.

Good quality assurance is essential to guarantee the quality of microcredentialials, and also to prevent the proliferation of microcredentialials. On the other hand, the Flemish Education Council warns against too heavy and stringent (additional) quality assurance procedures, as this can greatly limit the flexibility that microcredentialials offer. The council therefore advocates embedding microcredentialials in the existing quality assurance of the educational institutions and not through an additional quality assurance system¹³.

Further regulation of quality assurance for microcredentialials may not be necessary. Internal quality assurance for lifelong learning offerings forms part of an institution's overall education quality assurance policy, with institutions adhering to the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

For external quality assurance, the overall education quality assurance policy (including regarding microcredentialial offerings) from universities and universities of applied sciences in Belgium/Flanders fall within the scope of institutional reviews. The policy note of the

Flemish government of 2024 suggests that the procedures for quality assurance of the microcredentialial offer will be seen as part of the institutional review, that is obligatory for all HEI¹⁴.

Example Ghent University:

At Ghent University Quality assurance of lifelong learning initiatives is based on the following principles:

- quality assurance of lifelong learning initiatives is part of Ghent University's quality assurance policy for education;
- quality assurance of lifelong learning initiatives is in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);
- quality assurance of lifelong learning initiatives is subject to the subsidiarity principle: we distinguish between the various categories and grant powers to the most suitable (policy) level;
- this quality assurance is fit for purpose: relevant, effective, and based on lean administrative processes.

The following elements allow for the monitoring of quality assurance of lifelong learning initiatives:

- Clear procedures for setting up new initiatives;
- Monitoring and review by means of surveys and qualitative indicators;
- Follow-up measures and improvement policy tailored to the competent policy level, e.g. postgraduate programmes and microcredentialials at university level

¹³ Microcredentialials in Europees perspectief. (2021). Vlor. <https://www.vlor.be/adviezen/microcredentialials-europees-perspectief>

¹⁴ [Beslissingen van de Vlaamse Regering | Vlaanderen.be](https://www.vlaanderen.be)

or lecture series and study days at faculty or academy level. Regardless of the policy level involved, this process also calls for embedding the external perspective from the professional field.

- Publicly Available Information.

4.2. What progress has been made toward institutional and/or national standards in Belgium/Flanders?

Higher education

The Flemish policy domain has not yet officially adopted the term “microcredentials” or implemented a clear policy on the subject. However, exploratory steps towards developing such policies are underway. Discussions about microcredentials begin by examining what the current education landscape offers. At the beginning of 2024, the Flemish Government adopted a policy note on lifelong learning in higher education, introducing the term microcredential into higher education (HE) policy. This policy note builds on the work of the Higher Education Advancement Fund and presents a preliminary draft of potential agreements on the offer of microcredentials, but it requires further discussions with higher education institutions.

There is currently no officially approved definition of microcredentials. However, working documents utilise the European definition, along with the associated standard elements (see section 1.3). This approach ensures coherence with European standards and facilitates the exchange and recognition of microcredentials across different contexts and institutions. The Flemish Education Council (VLOR) supports the importance of these standard elements in realising the full potential of microcredentials. This alignment allows for transparency, interoperability, and the stacking of microcredentials into larger qualifications. However, agreements are necessary on how these elements will be applied within the Flemish educational landscape.

Recently, microcredentials have been increasingly used in Flemish higher education, although many practices within HE for years can already be viewed as microcredentials. This includes both basic training (in higher education, it is possible to enrol in individual courses from a bachelor’s or master’s programme through a credit contract) and a broader range of lifelong learning programmes, such as one-year top-up programmes leading to additional bachelor’s or master’s degrees, postgraduate programmes, and courses for continuous professional development. The recognition of previously acquired qualifications (EVK) and the valorisation of previously acquired competencies (EVC) have been in place for over 20 years.

Vocational education and training

In Flanders we make a distinction between educational qualifications and professional qualifications, which is particularly relevant in VET. Partial qualifications contain a number of competences of a full professional qualification. Such partial qualifications could be considered a kind of microcredential (although not officially called as such) since they make for an official record of successfully completed formal learning but cannot be considered a full qualification. The same is true for a certificate of competences, which follows from a procedure to recognize competences achieved outside of formal learning.

In secondary education (SE) an educational qualification is granted upon successful completion of an educational programme. Vocational educational programmes in SE contain general attainment targets combined with a (partial) professional qualification. In case a student obtains all educational objectives of the programme, a diploma of secondary education is awarded. If this is not the case, a certificate is granted depending on those competences which have been acquired by the student.

Possible certificates are:

- ▶ a certificate of professional qualification (when the objectives related to the professional qualification have been met),
- ▶ a certificate of partial qualification (when the objectives of a partial qualification have been met) and a certificate of competences. In secondary education however a student cannot enroll with the purpose of achieving only a (partial) professional qualification or a certificate of competences. This contrary to partial qualifications obtained in adult education, where you can enroll with the aim of only obtaining a partial qualification or module certificate, which both can also be considered as a kind of microcredentials (although not officially called as such).

The reason why these attestations are not officially called microcredentials is linked to the fact that in Flanders there is no official definition of microcredentials in VET yet. However, exploratory steps towards the development of policies are taking place. Initiatives that fit the European definition of microcredentials do have an established definition: 1) partial qualification = coherent sets of competencies from the same professional qualification that provide exit opportunities in a narrower segment of the labor market than the full professional qualification, 2) module certificate = a legally recognized certificate, issued by the administration of a Centre for adult education to a student who has successfully completed a module in basic education or secondary adult education. In VET there's no use of ECTS. In adult education modules are expressed in teaching periods. There is no minimum or maximum set for a module.

Towards a framework for the use of microcredentials in higher education

A preliminary framework for microcredentials has been co-created by higher education institutions, reflecting a shared vision. The government has established a working group for

this purpose, consisting of representatives from the 5 universities and 13 universities of applied sciences in Flanders. The working group met four times in 2023, resulting in the first draft of the framework agreement, and was reconvened in 2024 to continue working on it.

This framework aims to increase transparency around the concept of microcredentials, ensuring that learners and employers can form a clear understanding of microcredentials in higher education. This framework is non-binding and not legislatively anchored. It does not prevent institutions from offering lifelong learning in different ways and applies only to universities and university colleges in Flanders, though it can serve as inspiration for other providers.

The framework seeks to establish agreements on the use of the term microcredential, its position within higher education institutions' offerings, its characteristics, registration, and certification. These agreements respond to the requests of the European Commission and VLOR to develop a common framework for microcredentials in Flanders.

The draft framework is the first step towards a broader policy on lifelong learning in higher education in Flanders. Further debate and coordination are needed among HE institutions and other lifelong learning stakeholders.

The use of the term microcredential according to the (first draft of the) framework

While the European definition is broader, the term microcredential within higher education is reserved for a specific part of the lifelong learning offerings of a higher education institution that meets all the criteria described below.

In the Flemish higher education landscape, we can describe four types of microcredentials:

- ▶ Type 1: Microcredentials consisting of one or more existing course units from our Bachelor's and/or Master's programmes.;

- ▶ Type 2: Microcredentials consisting of one or more existing course units from our Bachelor's and/or Master's programmes, complemented by additional lifelong learning initiatives.
- ▶ Type 3: Microcredentials consisting of new units with learning contents from our Bachelor's and/or Master's programmes
- ▶ Type 4: Microcredentials consisting of new learning contents or learning contents taken from existing lifelong learning initiatives.

Some institutions work with only two categories: microcredentials based on the existing offerings (type 1 supra) and microcredentials consisting of new content (types 2, 3 and 4 supra).

In terms of content, microcredentials must meet the needs of the professional field and of society at large, as well as the expectations of learners.

The position of microcredentials compared to higher education institution offerings

HE institutions decide autonomously when to offer a new microcredential or discontinue one, what name it will have, the language of instruction, and where it will be offered, as long as it falls within a field for which the institution is authorised.

When discontinuing a programme, institutions must provide sufficient opportunities for enrolled students to complete it.

Characteristics of a microcredential according to the (first draft of the) framework

- ▶ The study load of a microcredential is expressed in ECTS credits, typically ranging between 3 and 20 ECTS. The upper limits are linked to rules regarding the minimum duration of postgraduate (20 ECTS) or master's programmes (60 ECTS).
- ▶ Microcredentials may be offered in-person, in hybrid formats, or via distance learning, depending on the target audience.

- ▶ Microcredentials are defined by a set of learning outcomes that meet the needs of learners, the workforce, and society. These learning outcomes are classified under one of the levels of the Flemish Qualifications Framework.
- ▶ For Type 1 microcredentials, the qualification level corresponds to the original programme. For microcredentials that draw from different levels, the highest-level component takes precedence.
- ▶ Other microcredentials must classify their learning outcomes accordingly.
- ▶ Learning outcomes are assessed, and the method of evaluation is communicated to students in advance.
- ▶ HE institutions offer appropriate student support, although services may vary depending on the microcredential.
- ▶ Admission requirements are determined by the institution, with minimal restrictions to ensure accessibility.
- ▶ Microcredentials are qualifications that can be used in recognition of prior learning (EVK) procedures to apply for exemptions.

In September 2024, a new Flemish Government was formed, and providing a framework for microcredentials in higher education is included in the coalition agreement, as follows: "We will develop a system to award microcredentials in higher education to encourage lifelong learning." This text once again highlights the strong focus on higher education for implementing microcredentials in Flanders. The activities of the previously mentioned working group have resumed with the aim of finalizing and formalizing the framework of agreements. The draft remains the foundation, but adjustments—such as to the minimum and maximum study load—are certain to be made to fully leverage the potential.

4.3. To what extent are microcredentials integrated into, or being considered for, integration with the national and regional qualifications frameworks?

Microcredentials in Belgium/Flanders are being integrated into the existing qualifications frameworks by aligning them with the Flemish Qualifications Framework (FQF). Each microcredential is described by a set of learning outcomes, which are classified into one of the levels of the FQF. This classification ensures that microcredentials are recognised within the broader educational and professional landscape.

At present, microcredentials mainly exist in the higher education (HE) sector. They are typically based on course units at European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels 6 and 7, and sometimes level 5.

In Flanders, the term “Erkennen van Verworven Competenties (EVC)” is used to refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning (recognition of acquired competences). The procedure for the recognition of previously acquired competences (EVCs) in Belgium can be initiated upon submission of proof of experience, a document demonstrating that the individual has acquired certain competence(s) as verified by a test centre recognised by the Flemish government. The outcome of this process is a certificate of professional qualification, which may grant admission to an education or training programme, or lead to exemptions from parts of the study programme.

Within this process, it is possible to obtain a partial qualification that does not cover all the competences and skills required for a full professional qualification. This partial qualification is considered an official qualification. It is also possible to obtain proof of competence, which covers an even

smaller scope than a partial qualification. Both the partial qualification and the proof of competence share characteristics with microcredentials.

Furthermore, a single integrated quality assurance framework for professional qualifications at all levels has been developed, which links validation processes to the Flemish Qualifications Framework (FQF).

In Flanders, the term “Erkenning van Verworven Kwalificaties (EVK)” is used for the recognition of prior learning. Each higher education institution (HEI) can autonomously carry out this procedure. The conditions, principles, and requirements are established by law as part of the Codex Hoger Onderwijs.

4.4. What practical steps should be taken in developing national and regional microcredential policy frameworks?

The Flemish Education Council (VLOR) states¹⁵:

- ▶ **Adopt a Clear Definition:** Establish a legally enshrined definition of microcredentials, based on the European definition, ensuring shared understanding across educational and training institutions. This step fosters consistency and improves awareness of microcredentials among learners, employers, and institutions.
- ▶ **Ensure Flexibility and Inclusivity:** Develop policies that accommodate the diverse range of educational institutions and training providers, from formal higher education to non-formal and informal learning settings. Allow for flexibility in the scope and delivery of microcredentials to meet the varying needs of learners and the labour market.
- ▶ **Establish Quality Assurance Mechanisms:** Integrate microcredentials into existing quality assurance frameworks,

¹⁵ Microcredentials als instrument om levenslang en levensbreed leren te stimuleren. (2023.). Vlor. <https://www.vlor.be/adviezen/microcredentials-als-instrument-om-levenslang-en-levensbreed-leren-te-stimuleren>

ensuring transparency and reliability without creating additional administrative burdens. This would ensure that learners and employers trust the value of microcredentials.

- ▶ **Support Collaborative Efforts:** Encourage partnerships and collaborations among different stakeholders, including educational institutions, employers, and social partners, to create a complementary offer of microcredentials that addresses both professional and personal development goals.
- ▶ **Promote Lifelong Guidance Services:** Embed microcredentials into lifelong career guidance services to help learners navigate available training options and better understand how microcredentials fit into their educational and career pathways.
- ▶ **Provide Sustainable Funding:** Ensure both start-up and ongoing funding for the development and maintenance of microcredentials, enabling educational providers to continuously offer these programmes without compromising existing educational offerings

One of the main challenges will be to align the system for microcredentials in HE with the other sectors offering microcredentials.

Summary

The development of a microcredential policy in Belgium/Flanders is advancing steadily, with an emphasis on maintaining quality assurance while preserving flexibility. Stakeholders recognise the need for a balance between standardisation, based on the European definition of microcredentials, and the diverse needs of learners and institutions. Quality assurance is seen as a critical factor, with a preference for embedding microcredentials within existing institutional frameworks rather than creating additional, burdensome procedures.

Progress towards establishing a national framework is ongoing, with steps taken to integrate microcredentials into higher education through policy notes and collaborative efforts with educational institutions. However, further discussions are required to fully align microcredentials with the broader qualifications frameworks and ensure consistency across different learning environments.

Looking ahead, the focus will be on formalising definitions, ensuring flexible policies that cater to various educational settings, and establishing clear quality assurance mechanisms.

Collaboration among stakeholders and sustainable funding are also key factors for ensuring the success of microcredentials. The challenge remains to harmonise the higher education microcredential system with offerings in other sectors, enabling a cohesive approach to lifelong learning and employability.



METHODOLOGY

This report is in the first place based on desktop research, primarily the following documents:

- ▶ Microcredentials in Europees perspectief. (2021). Vlor. Microcredentials als instrument om levenslang en levensbreed leren te stimuleren. (2023.). Vlor
- ▶ Council of the European Union. (2022). Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to microcredentials for lifelong learning and employability.
- ▶ Action plan on lifelong learning. Setting sail for a learning Flanders. (2021). Vlaanderen.

Secondly, discussions within the existing “Workgroup on lifelong learning in higher education” with representatives of all Flemish higher education institutions, focused on the development of a vision on lifelong learning within higher education and a framework for microcredentials.

In the third place we made use of our experience in European projects focused on microcredentials (e.g. the Erasmus+ project **MicroBol** - Microcredentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments) and with Ghent University's own pilot projects on microcredentials.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings across the chapters highlight the growing importance of microcredentials within the context of lifelong learning in Flanders, alongside the need for inclusive policies and flexible learning pathways.

Key insights from the analysis include

- ▶ **Challenges in lifelong learning:** Belgium/Flanders faces significant barriers to increasing participation in lifelong learning, particularly among older adults, lower-qualified individuals, and the non-working population. These issues stem from a weak learning culture and require targeted strategies to enhance inclusivity and engagement in learning opportunities.
- ▶ **Alignment with European recommendations:** The adoption of the European definition of microcredentials offers a cohesive framework that aligns with Flanders' political, social, and economic context. This approach addresses contemporary challenges and supports both educational and workforce trends.
- ▶ **Diverse role of providers:** The ecosystem of microcredential providers in Flanders is diverse, encompassing educational institutions, social partners, employers, civil society, and government bodies. These actors deliver formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities. The flexibility and potential benefits of microcredentials, such as increased access to education, skill development, and local economic impact, underline their value across sectors.
- ▶ **Implementation progress:** While Flanders has made strides in integrating microcredentials into higher education, a clear regulatory framework is still in development. Existing practices within different higher education institutions, both individually and through consortia, demonstrate that much can be achieved

within the current legal framework by leveraging the among stakeholders widely accepted European definitions and elements.

- ▶ **Policy development:** The development of microcredential policies in Flanders is progressing steadily. Embedding microcredentials within existing institutional frameworks, rather than creating new layers of regulation, is preferred to maintain flexibility. Further discussions and collaborations are needed to fully align microcredentials with national qualifications frameworks, ensuring coherence across educational settings.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance access to lifelong learning:** Develop targeted campaigns and programmes to boost participation in lifelong learning, particularly for vulnerable groups such as older adults, low-skilled individuals, and job seekers.
2. **Establish a clear policy framework for microcredentials:** Collaborate with educational institutions, employers, and government bodies to develop a legally enshrined definition and framework for microcredentials. This framework should be based on commonly accepted (supra-national) standards (in our case: European) and clearly define the role of microcredentials across formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts.
3. **Integrate microcredentials into existing quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks:** Ensure that microcredentials are covered by existing quality assurance mechanisms, using the established systems of educational institutions. This involves incorporating microcredentials into internal and external quality reviews, such as institutional audits, without creating additional administrative

burdens. This also facilitates the incorporation of microcredentials in already existing qualifications frameworks.

4. Foster collaboration among stakeholders:

Promote partnerships between educational institutions, employers, social partners, and government agencies to create a comprehensive range of microcredentials.

Such collaboration will help align learning programmes with labour market needs and societal developments, such as the green transition and digital skills.

5. Ensure sustainable funding:

Secure both start-up and ongoing funding for the development and implementation of microcredentials.

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