



## Micro-credentials Policy

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## 1. Purpose

‘Education, Training and Lifelong Learning’ is the first pillar of *The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan* (European Commission, 2021). The pillar highlights that:

‘...everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market’.

The Commission proposes three targets to be achieved by 2030 in the areas of employment, skills, and social protection; one of these is that at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year. In that context, the Commission recognises the key role played by education and training systems, including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in laying the foundations for lifelong learning, employability and meaningful participation in society.

ATU is a HEI whose mission is to ‘nurture prosperity across the region through excellent education and research’. As a Technological University, ATU delivers programmes from Levels 6 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which provide a ladder of progression for students. Our core offering of *Major* awards has traditionally been complemented by shorter programmes of learning (i.e., *Minor, Supplemental* and *Special Purpose Awards* (SPAs)).

Micro-credentials – which are shorter, focused, credit-bearing learning modules, provide an opportunity for ATU to complement the University’s traditional programmes by:

- developing short *new* modules which respond to identified workplace and social needs,
- offering select modules from accredited programmes as micro-credentials,
- re-branding, where appropriate, existing short programmes (i.e. *Single Subject Certificates, Minor Awards* and *Supplemental Awards*) as micro-credentials.

The recent *Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability* (EU, 2022; p.13) highlights how:

‘learning experiences leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs’.

Increasing our short learning provision demonstrates ATU’s commitment to advancing social rights, fostering continuous learning opportunities, supporting inclusion and access to higher education for under-represented groups, enhancing employability, and addressing specific skills gaps.

ATU's commitment to providing short learning opportunities as micro-credentials also demonstrates our responsibility to Goal 4 of the *Sustainable Development Goals* (UN, 2015) which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

## 2. Scope

This policy applies to all staff involved in the development, validation, delivery, management, assessment, and quality assurance of micro-credentials at ATU.

In using the term 'Micro-credential', ATU subscribes to the definition of a Micro-credential employed by the European Council (2022), which states:

*'A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards.'*

Thus, in addition to outlining the principles guiding the development, validation, assessment, and certification of micro-credentials at ATU, this policy document underscores the standards essential for maintaining consistent quality assurance and ensuring alignment with the broader educational objectives of the European Council.

This policy does not pertain to non-credit bearing learning that may take place in the University.

## 3. External Reference Documents

- *A European Approach to Micro-Credentials: Output of the Micro-credentials Higher Education Consultation Group* (European Council (EC), 2020)
- *The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan* (European Commission, 2021)
- *QQI Early Exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014-2020* (QQI, 2021)
- *MICROBOL Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA* (MICROBOL, 2022)
- *Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability* (European Council (EC), 2022)
- *Microcredentials for labour market education and training* (Cedefop, 2022)
- *Guide to Design, Issue and Recognise Micro-credentials* (European Training Foundation, 2022)

- *Approaches to Quality Assurance of Micro-credentials* (ENQA, 2023)
- *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Learning Programmes* (QQI, 2023)

## 4. Policy

### 4.1 Definitions

#### **Credentials**

Statement issued by a competent authority (*e.g.* education or training provider, awarding body, professional organisation) describing a learning action.

#### **Micro-credential**

A record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. The term 'micro-credential' is commonly understood to refer to both the credential itself *and* the education or training programme which leads to the credential award.

#### **Module**

A module is a discrete unit of study. Each module carries a credit weighting in accordance with the European Credit Transfer & Accumulation System (ECTS). At ATU, all modules account for a minimum of 5 ECTS credits, or whole multiples thereof.

#### **Programme**

ATU provides programmes of study, the successful completion of which leads to a University award. Programmes are comprised of modules of study, which are organised into pathways for completion over the duration of the programme.

#### **Portability**

'Portability' means the ability for a credential-holder to store their micro-credential in a system of their choice, to share the credential with a party of their choice (whether national or transnational) and for all parties in the exchange to be able to understand the content of and verify the authenticity of the credential (EC, 2022).

#### **Stackability**

The ability for small certified educational credentials to be combined or 'stacked' to contribute towards a larger qualification or formal degree. Stacking does not create an automatic entitlement to an award or a degree. At ATU, for micro-credentials to be stackable towards an award, they must be pre-validated as part of the programme leading to the award. See section 4.3.5 for further detail.

## 4.2 Guiding Principles

Ten principles underpin the approach to the provision of Micro-credentials by ATU. These are informed by the guidance provided by the European Council (EC, 2022) for all providers involved in delivery of Micro-credentials.

### 1. *Quality Assurance*

Micro-credentials at ATU are subject to internal and external quality assurance in accordance with our Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework (AQAEF).

### 2. *Transparency*

Micro-credentials offered and provided by ATU are measurable, comparable and understandable, and contain clear information on NFQ level, entry requirements, learning outcomes, workload, content and assessment.

### 3. *Relevance*

Micro-credentials at ATU are designed and issued as distinct, targeted learning achievements. Learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials are updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs. ATU will collaborate with employers, industrial and social partners and other stakeholders as necessary, in order to increase the relevance of our micro-credentials offering for the labour market.

### 4. *Valid Assessment*

At ATU, Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent criteria.

### 5. *Learning Pathways*

Micro-credentials are designed and issued to support flexible learning pathways. Micro-credentials are designed to be modular so that other micro-credentials may be added to create larger credentials.

### 6. *Recognition*

At ATU, Micro-credentials have a clear signalling value of learning outcomes for smaller modules of learning.

### 7. *Portable*

Micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner) and may be stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets (e.g. *Europass*), in line with the General Data Protection Regulation.

#### 8. *Learner-centredness*

At ATU, all Micro-credentials are designed to meet the needs of the target group of learners. Learners are involved in quality assurance processes, and their feedback is considered as part of the continuous improvement of micro-credentials.

#### 9. *Authenticity*

All certification for Micro-credentials provided by ATU will contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credential-holder (learner) and will confirm the legal identity of ATU as the issuer, as well as the date and place of issuance of the micro-credential.

#### 10. *Information and Guidance*

At ATU, information and advice on micro-credentials will be clearly visible and accessible on our website and in promotional materials. Micro-credentials will be promoted at Open Days and external Career Fairs and events, with a view to reaching the broadest possible learner groups, in an inclusive way, thus supporting education, training and career choices.

### **4.3 Characteristics of Micro-credentials offered by the University**

All ATU micro-credentials have a *learning level*, are *credit bearing*, are *short and flexible*, are *quality assured*, and depending on design and focus, may be *stackable*.

#### **4.3.1 Learning level**

Micro-credentials provided by ATU are offered at levels 6 – 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). A micro-credential *may* have an entry requirement (e.g., the applicant might be required to hold an award at the NFQ level immediately below that at which the micro-credential is validated).

#### **4.3.2 Credit-bearing**

Micro-credentials offered by ATU will be in the range of 5 – 15 ECTS credits (1 ECTS credit = 25 learning workload hours), to comprise a *single* module, regardless of credit volume. Learners who successfully complete an ATU micro-credential will be awarded a (verifiable) digital certificate attesting to their achievement, thus ensuring its portability, both nationally and internationally.

#### **4.3.3 Short and Flexible**

Micro-credentials provided by ATU are designed to be '*Short*' and '*Flexible*'. It will be possible for students to achieve a micro-credential in a short timeframe, typically 15 weeks

or less. Delivery formats (asynchronous online, synchronous online, on-campus, blended) and timeframes will ensure that learning takes place at a time and pace which facilitates balance between life and work commitments for the learner.

#### **4.3.4 Quality Assured**

Similar to all other accredited University awards, micro-credentials offered by ATU are underpinned by quality assured teaching, learning and assessment processes which are detailed within the University's *Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework* (AQAEF). Quality assurance of all programmes at ATU are informed by the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG, 2015), and the *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* and *Topic Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines* issued by Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

#### **4.3.5 Stackability**

'Stackability' refers to the ability of smaller educational credentials to be combined or 'stacked' to contribute towards a larger qualification or formal degree.

##### **4.3.5.1 Stackable Micro-credential**

A stackable micro-credential is a specific certification that can be combined with others to contribute towards a broader qualification or degree. Such micro-credentials represent distinct skills or competencies and, when purposefully aligned (in advance) with an existing programme, can form part of a larger educational structure. Specifically, when a micro-credential is designed as a subset of requirements for a named award, it is deemed to be "stackable". At ATU, these stackable micro-credentials are integrated into predefined learner pathways, advancing towards another award. Their modular nature offers learners the flexibility to earn credentials incrementally, supporting a philosophy of continuous, lifelong learning.

##### **4.3.5.2. Non-stackable Micro-credential**

A non-stackable micro-credential is a distinct certification that, whilst carrying ECTS credit, doesn't directly align or articulate with a specific *programme*. Unlike its stackable counterpart, its primary design isn't as a subset of a broader qualification. However, its value isn't diminished. The learning achieved through these credentials can still be woven into a larger educational tapestry (at ATU and other HEIs) through recognition of prior learning (RPL) and can thus contribute to a continuous educational journey. ATU's *AQAE009 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy* provides that RPL for module credit and/or exemption will be considered for approval for Minor Awards and Special Purpose Awards (Levels 6-9) for programmes comprising 10 ECTS credits and above. This includes Micro-credentials in the range of 10-15 ECTS credits.



#### 4.4 Verification and Certification of Micro-credentials

In verifying and certifying micro-credentials, ATU employs the European standard elements to describe micro-credentials as set out in the *Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability* (EC, 2022).

Thus, all micro-credentials certified by ATU will contain the following mandatory details:

1. Identification of the learner
2. Title of the micro-credential
3. Origin (Ireland as the country of origin and ATU as the issuer)
4. Awarding Body (ATU or a linked provider)
5. Date of issuing
6. Learning outcomes (LOs)
7. Notional workload needed to achieve the LOs – expressed as ECTS credits
8. NFQ level
9. Type of assessment
10. Form of participation in the learning activity

For stackable micro-credentials (those which formally align to or articulate with an existing programme leading to a named award at ATU), the promotional material and certification will indicate the stackability options open to the micro-credential holder.

#### 4.5 Format of Certification

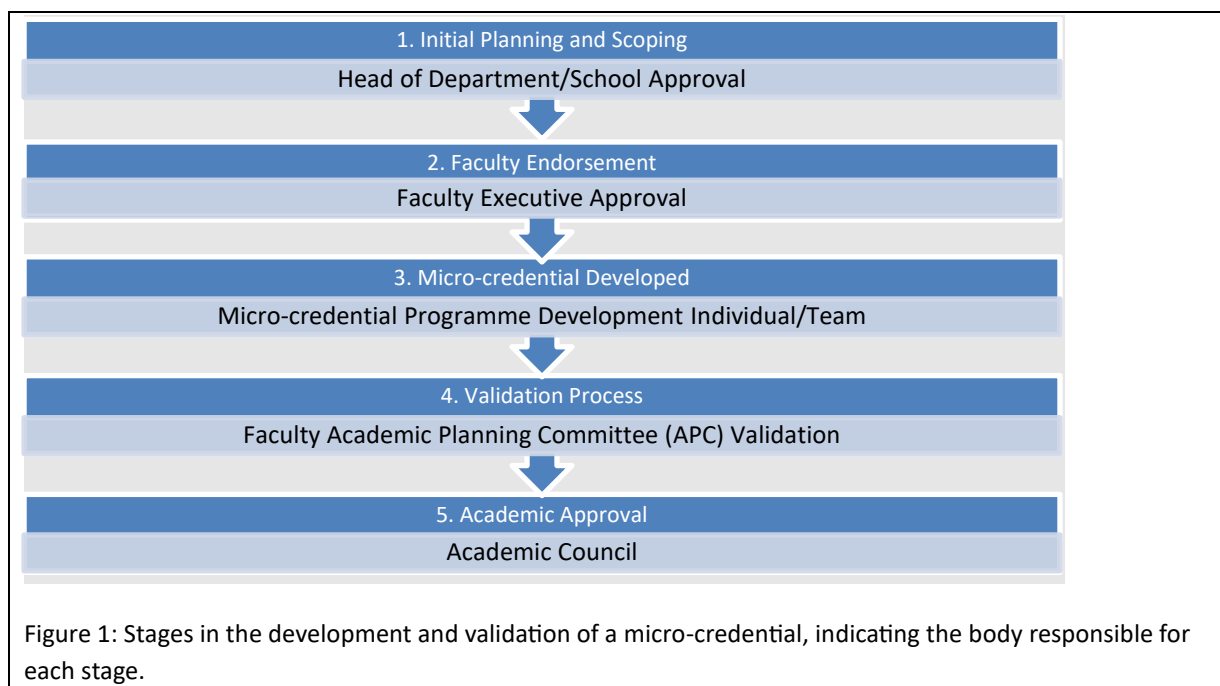
After successful completion of the micro-credential, the student will receive a printable certificate attesting to their achievement (acquisition of specific skill or competency) which will detail the information outlined in 4.4. above. The certificate will also be *digitally verifiable* to certify its authenticity and the identity of its holder, and to enhance its secure portability.

#### 4.6 Process for Micro-credential Development and Validation

The stages in the development of a new taught programme at ATU from its initial inception to approval is outlined in *AQAE003 Developing and Validating New Taught Programmes Policy*. Reflecting the nature of micro-credentials as shorter units of study, the development and validation of micro-credentials comprises fewer stages than a major award. The stages follow those outlined for Minor Awards, but with removal of the requirement for *Outline Permission*, thus allowing ATU to respond quickly in providing opportunities for learning which address societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs.

##### 4.6.1 Stages in the Development, Validation and Approval of Micro-credentials

The process for the development and validation of a micro-credential is summarised in figure 1 below.



The proposal for a micro-credential may emanate from any academic staff member or group of academics within the University. An initial proposal will be drawn up on *Academic Module Manager (AMM)* and discussed with the relevant Head(s) of Department/School who will consider the strategic fit and merits of the proposal. The Head of Department/School will refer the proposal to the Faculty Executive for endorsement.

The curriculum for the micro-credential will be developed. This may involve collaboration with industry experts, academic professionals, and instructional designers.

Thereafter, the Faculty APC assesses the suitability and viability of the proposed micro-credential. In considering the approval of a micro-credential, the Faculty APC will use the following criteria:

1. The rationale for the micro-credential is well-informed and justified.
2. There is demand for the micro-credential from industry partners/professional bodies/voluntary sector. In-demand knowledge and skills are addressed, and content is relevant.
3. The micro-credential is appropriately structured and fit for purpose. The teaching and learning strategy is flexible and appropriate to the needs of the intended students.
4. The aims and learning outcomes (LOs) of the micro-credential are clear and aligned with the relevant NFQ level. The micro-credential is designed to ensure students can successfully achieve the LOs.
5. The learning environment and mode of delivery are consistent with the needs of the intended students of the micro-credential. Teaching, learning and assessment

practices and associated activities and resources provide every student with an equitable, fair, and realistic opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

6. Assessment techniques are fair, valid, reliable, consistent and provide a credible mechanism to measure the academic standard required.
7. The planned resources, including administrative infrastructure, staffing, physical, online, and library sufficiently support the teaching, learning and assessment strategy for the micro-credential.
8. The micro-credential facilitates lifelong learning for a diverse student population by setting out clear entry requirements and opportunities for 'stacking' (where relevant), progression and RPL.
9. Students will be well informed on the requirements of the micro-credential, guided to relevant resources and supported in their studies.

The Academic Council will consider the recommendation of the Faculty APC, and if satisfied with the recommendation as tabled, will approve the validation of the micro-credential.

The decision to commence a programme is made by the VP for Academic Affairs & Registrar in conjunction with the Faculty Executive.

Further detail on each of the stages is outlined in the *Procedure for the Development, Validation and Certification of a Micro-credential Award*. It should be noted that the requirements at stage 1 and stage 3 of the process will vary, depending on whether the micro-credential is (a) a new module (b) a module from an already validated programme, or (c) an existing short programme which is being re-branded as a micro-credential.

#### **4.7 Quality Assurance**

Informed by the European Council Recommendation (EC, 2022), quality assurance and enhancement of Micro-credentials at ATU is covered by internal quality assurance based on the quality standards specified in Chapter 3.1. of the EQF ESG (2015); all of which are enshrined in the principles underpinning our provision as set out in section 4.2. of this policy.

ATU will employ the same *internal* quality assurance processes for micro-credentials as for other awards but given the nature of micro-credentials as single *modules* rather than *programmes*, micro-credentials will not be subject to programmatic review, will not require a Programme Board nor the appointment of an External Examiner. Furthermore, certain provisions of academic quality assurance policies will not apply to micro-credentials (for example, provision for 'progress & carry' decisions (which is a multi-stage programme possibility) is not relevant in the context of micro-credentials).

Periodic monitoring, evaluation and enhancement will be integral to the provision of micro-credentials, and will involve:

- Collection of feedback from students at the end of the module
- Collection of feedback from external stakeholders (such as employers or their representative organisations, among others), as appropriate, on micro-credentials.

This feedback, collected as part of a regular evaluation cycle, will be utilised to inform potential revision and enhancement of micro-credentials.

## **4.8 Roles and Responsibilities**

### **4.8.1 Vice President Academic Affairs & Registrar**

The Vice President Academic Affairs & Registrar is responsible for the quality assurance of all academic programmes, including Micro-credentials.

The Vice President Academic Affairs & Registrar will nominate representation to the Faculty Academic Planning Committees. This nominee must participate in the internal validation of micro-credentials.

In support of this policy, the Office of the VP for Academic Affairs & Registrar, through the Quality Office, must

- maintain Academic Module Manager (AMM), the document management system for programmes and modules, and the student record management system (SRMS),
- make appropriate arrangements for admittance, registration, examination and maintenance of the record of student performance,
- oversee and support Faculties in the implementation of the policy requirements, and
- undertake a review of this policy as required.

### **4.8.2 Faculty Executive**

The Faculty Executive comprising the Heads of Faculty/School and Departments are responsible for reviewing all programme proposals for strategic fit and consistency with Faculty plans.

The Faculty Executive will have the following specified duties:

- to review and evaluate all New Programme Proposal forms, including micro-credentials, and
- to endorse micro-credentials proposals to proceed to development.

#### 4.8.3 Faculty Academic Planning Committee (APC)

The Heads of Faculty/School will establish and chair a Faculty APC. The function of the committee will be to advise, support and evaluate academic planning, in particular the development, validation, management, and monitoring of programmes within the faculty.

The Faculty APC will typically comprise:

- The Head of Faculty/School (Chair),
- All Heads of Faculty/School and Department within the Faculty,
- 3-5 Members of Academic staff
- Nominee(s) from the Office of the VP Academic Affairs and Registrar, and
- Student representatives.

The Faculty APC will be responsible for the validation of programmes identified as micro-credentials as outlined in section 4.6.1.

## 5. Associated Documents Generated by this Policy

*Procedure for the Development, Validation and Certification of a Micro-credential Award (under development)*

## 6. Revision History

Revision No	Description of Change	Approval Date
000	New Policy Approved by Academic Council	08/12/2024