



Part XXXIX: Accreditation Review Guidelines for Micro-credentials

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Applicable Scope: All private higher education institutions holding or applying for IQA accreditation that offer micro-credential programmes.

Preface

The landscape of higher education is undergoing a quiet but profound transformation. Traditionally, the degree was the sole currency of higher education achievement. In an era when lifelong learning is increasingly the norm and occupational skills change rapidly, short, modular learning focused on specific capabilities - micro-credentials - is rising quickly as an important bridge between academic education and professional development. For private higher education institutions, micro-credentials are both a strategic opportunity to respond to learners and employers and a natural arena for flexibility and innovation.

Rapid expansion also brings unavoidable quality challenges. When learning is no longer a complete degree curriculum but a series of fragmented modules, how can the institution ensure a rigorously designed learning experience of sufficient depth? When micro-credentials can be "stacked" for degree credit, how can the integrity and academic standards of the degree be protected? When they enter the market, how can they be prevented from becoming a "false currency" with no substantive learning outcomes?

IAPUC adopts one central understanding: while the volume of learning in a micro-credential is small, its quality requirements should not be reduced. Its learning outcomes should be substantively comparable with those of degree courses at the same level. That comparability is a precondition for creating genuine value. A micro-credential is a "building block" of a degree, not a shortcut. Institutions may provide flexible pathways and credit accumulation, but may not lower substantive requirements for learning outcomes.

These Guidelines align with and complement the *IAPUC-IQA Academic Accreditation Quality Standards Manual*, the *Supplementary Standards for Quality Accreditation of Distance and Hybrid Education* and the *Academic Accreditation Criteria for Credit Recognition and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*. They provide a quality-assurance framework that respects the innovative vitality of micro-credentials while upholding academic boundaries.

Chapter I General Provisions

Article 1 Purpose and Basis

These Guidelines are intended to:

- (1) provide a principled framework and operational guidance for accredited institutions to design, deliver and manage micro-credential programmes;
- (2) define the scope, review dimensions and quality floor for micro-credentials under the IQA Accreditation System;
- (3) establish rules connecting micro-credential learning outcomes with degree learning outcomes and protect academic integrity of the degree; and

(4) provide IQA experts with evaluation dimensions and points of attention when reviewing institutional micro-credential programmes.

These Guidelines are formulated on the basis of:

- the core requirements concerning curriculum design, definition of learning outcomes and assessment in the *IAPUC-IQA Academic Accreditation Quality Standards Manual*;
- the principles concerning equivalence of learning outcomes and credit limits in the *Academic Accreditation Criteria for Credit Recognition and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*;
- the provisions concerning online-learning quality and assessment integrity in the *Supplementary Standards for Quality Accreditation of Distance and Hybrid Education*;
- the basic principles of truthful and accurate representation and integrity in the *IAPUC-IQA Academic Ethics and Conduct Code*; and
- recommendations on quality assurance in UNESCO's 2022 global study of micro-credentials.

Article 2 Scope of Application

These Guidelines apply to:

- (1) Credit-bearing micro-credentials: credentials assigned a defined credit value that can be accumulated and may be used to apply for a full degree. These are the principal object of IQA review.
- (2) Non-credit micro-credentials: credentials with no credit value but with stated intended learning outcomes and assessment standards, normally designed for occupational-skills development or continuing education.
- (3) A participation certificate based solely on attendance or participation and containing no formal assessment of learning outcomes is outside these Guidelines and the IQA accreditation scope. Institutions must distinguish its nature clearly from that of a micro-credential in public communications.

Article 3 Basic Principles

Principle	Core Meaning
Explicit Outcomes	Every micro-credential must have clearly defined learning outcomes describing the knowledge, skills or competencies a learner will possess. Those outcomes are the central reference for quality evaluation.

Principle	Core Meaning
Appropriate Volume	The learning workload must match the stated outcomes. For a credit-bearing micro-credential, the credit value must be demonstrably proportionate to the breadth and depth of those outcomes.
Authentic Assessment	Award must be based on authentic and reliable assessment. The promise of learning outcomes represented by the credential must be supported by assessment results.
Information Transparency	Content, learning outcomes, assessment method, workload and credit value where applicable must be transparent to learners and the public.
Evidence-Based Articulation	Articulation with a degree, especially where multiple credentials are stacked for credit, must follow clear and public rules logically connected to learning outcomes.

Chapter II Design and Quality Requirements

Article 4 Definition of Learning Outcomes

Every micro-credential must state its learning outcomes when published. They must be:

- specific: describing clearly the knowledge, skills or competencies to be demonstrated;
- assessable: capable of verification through credible assessment; and
- proportionate: matched in scope and depth to the learning workload.

Outcomes may correspond to those of one or more courses in a degree programme or focus on a discrete specialist capability.

Article 5 Determining Learning Workload

(1) A credit-bearing micro-credential must state its credit value, determined through a reasonable estimate of learning workload. The institution must explain how credits are derived from teaching, independent study, assignments and assessment.

(2) The relationship between micro-credential credits and degree-course credits must be reasonably explainable. The institution must identify the workload-estimation

method and show whether the depth of outcomes has a comparable basis with degree courses at the same level.

Article 6 Design and Implementation of Assessment

(1) Every micro-credential must include formal assessment of its learning outcomes and must authentically determine whether learners have achieved them.

(2) Assessment design must match the type of outcome. The method shall be defined during instructional design and communicated in advance, including portfolio, practical demonstration, project report or objective test and the related evaluation criteria.

(3) Assessment may be separate from degree-course assessment, but must be comparably rigorous at the same level. Standards shall not be lowered merely because the volume is smaller.

(4) An institution shall not award credit for a "micro-credential" with no formal assessment or based only on attendance. A non-credit micro-credential should also include formal assessment; if the institution chooses none, the credential must be marked clearly "Not Formally Assessed."

Article 7 Award and Recording of Credit

(1) Credit awarded for a credit-bearing micro-credential shall be recorded formally under the institution's credit system and these Guidelines.

(2) A credit-bearing micro-credential should normally be worth at least one ECTS credit, or an equivalent 1-2 United States semester credit hours. Smaller learning units may be combined into a larger credential before credit is awarded.

(3) The transcript or learning record must identify the source of the credit as a micro-credential, distinguishing it from regular degree-course credit.

Chapter III Articulation Between Micro-credentials and Degrees

Article 8 Basic Principles of Articulation

(1) Award of a degree requires achievement of all intended degree learning outcomes. Accumulated micro-credentials cannot replace holistic verification of degree outcomes.

(2) Degree credit obtained through stacking must remain consistent with the logical structure of the degree curriculum, with a documented correspondence between micro-credential content and degree courses.

(3) Articulation rules must be published clearly so that learners know when enrolling whether and how the micro-credential can be used to apply for degree credit.

Article 9 Review Requirements for Stacking

Where learners may accumulate multiple micro-credentials for degree credit:

- (1) rules must be public and transparent, with a clear, reasoned mapping of each credential to courses or modules in the degree curriculum;
- (2) stacked credit should normally not exceed 50% of total degree credit, ensuring direct institutional assurance of the degree's core. A higher limit supported by sufficient academic reasons must be explained in the Self-Evaluation Report and accepted through review; and
- (3) when a learner applies using multiple credentials, the institution must review learning outcomes holistically, confirming complete coverage of the required outcome domains and the learner's higher-order ability to integrate learning into a coherent capability. This review may use a capstone assessment, comprehensive oral defence or structured interview.

Article 10 Jointly Developed Micro-credentials

Where a micro-credential is jointly developed or co-branded with an external partner, the institution must retain effective quality control over academic quality and assessment standards. The credential must identify clearly the name and role of each partner.

Chapter IV Presentation and Information Transparency

Article 11 Public Information

The public programme page or admissions materials must disclose clearly and completely:

- (1) the name of the micro-credential and the awarding institution;
- (2) learning outcomes, identifying specific capability after completion;
- (3) workload, including credit value where applicable and/or estimated total hours, mode and duration;
- (4) assessment method and passing criteria;
- (5) articulation rules, including whether it may be accumulated for degree credit and the specific mapping; and
- (6) a statement that the micro-credential is not a complete degree.

Article 12 Prohibited Representations

An institution shall not:

- (1) imply or claim equivalence to a complete degree;
- (2) imply or claim unconditional transfer into degree credit at any institution;
- (3) make unverifiable promises concerning labour-market recognition; or
- (4) imply that a non-credit or unassessed credential has the same academic substance as a formally assessed credit-bearing micro-credential.

Chapter V Review Under IQA Accreditation

Article 13 Accreditation Scope

- (1) Credit-bearing micro-credentials offered by an accredited institution fall within IQA accreditation. Quality-assurance practice must be presented in the relevant standards domains of the Self-Evaluation Report: Standard 2, Curriculum and Teaching, and Standard 4, Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes.
- (2) Non-credit micro-credentials are not mandatory within scope, but an institution may present good practice voluntarily. If such a credential demonstrates conformity with a standard, for example as curriculum innovation or social-responsibility practice, it may also inform review.

Article 14 Review Considerations

Experts shall focus on whether:

- every micro-credential has clearly defined, assessable learning outcomes;
- credit values have a reasonable workload basis;
- assessment design and implementation authentically verify achievement;
- articulation rules are clear, transparent and academically justified, with a reasonable stacking limit;
- public information is complete and accurate, without misleading representations; and
- the institution has an internal quality-review mechanism.

Article 15 Relationship with Accreditation Level

- (1) Micro-credential quality management forms part of the institution's overall quality-assurance system and informs the integrated accreditation judgement. Its weight depends on the scale and importance of micro-credentials in institutional activity.

(2) A systemic deficiency, such as large numbers of unassessed credentials, arbitrary credits or seriously misleading promotion, may be recorded as a negative accreditation finding.

Chapter VI Supplementary Provisions

Article 16 Definitions

Term	Definition
Micro-credential	Formal recognition of a short learning experience focused on specific outcomes, normally smaller in volume than a complete degree and either credit-bearing or non-credit.
Credit-Bearing Micro-credential	A micro-credential assigned a defined credit value that can be accumulated.
Stacking	A pathway in which a learner accumulates and combines multiple micro-credentials to apply for a higher qualification or degree credit.
Learning Outcomes	Specific statements of the knowledge, skills or competencies a learner should possess after completing a learning activity.

Article 17 Relationship with Other Regulatory Documents

Document	Relationship with These Guidelines
<i>IAPUC-IQA Academic Accreditation Quality Standards Manual</i>	These Guidelines provide a dedicated application of its requirements for curriculum design, learning-outcomes assessment and credit systems to micro-credentials.
<i>Academic Accreditation Criteria for Credit Recognition and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)</i>	Articulation rules draw on the RPL principles of outcome equivalence and credit limits.

Document	Relationship with These Guidelines
<i>Supplementary Standards for Quality Accreditation of Distance and Hybrid Education</i>	Where delivery is remote, teaching quality and assessment integrity are also subject to those Standards.

Article 18 Interpretation and Amendment

(1) These Guidelines shall be interpreted by the IAPUC Quality Accreditation Committee.

(2) Because the field is evolving rapidly, IAPUC reserves the right to revise them in light of international practice. A revised edition shall be published after Board approval with an appropriate transition period.

Article 19 Entry into Force and Transition

(1) These Guidelines shall enter into force on the date of approval by the IAPUC Board of Directors.

(2) An accredited institution already offering micro-credentials shall describe its practices and progress toward these principles in the first annual report after the effective date.

Appendix: Micro-credential Quality Self-Evaluation Checklist

Dimension	Core Self-Evaluation Question	Yes / Partly / No	Evidence Index
Definition of Learning Outcomes	Does every micro-credential have clear, specific and assessable learning outcomes?		

Dimension	Core Self-Evaluation Question	Yes / Partly / No	Evidence Index
Learning Workload	Does the credit value of each credit-bearing micro-credential have a reasonable workload basis?		
Assessment Design	Does every micro-credential include formal assessment, and does it verify achievement effectively?		
Assessment Implementation	Are assessment standards clear and communicated to learners in advance?		
Credit Records	Does the transcript clearly identify the micro-credential source of credit?		
Articulation Rules	Are rules clear, public and academically justified, with a reasonable stacking limit?		
Public Information	Is public information complete, accurate and free of misleading statements?		

Dimension	Core Self-Evaluation Question	Yes / Partly / No	Evidence Index
Quality Review	Is there an internal review mechanism that operates periodically?		

Document Approval

Role	Name/Position	Date
Drafted by	IAPUC Quality Accreditation Committee, Innovative Education Models Working Group	May 2026
Reviewed by	IAPUC Quality Accreditation Committee	Pending
Approved by	IAPUC Board of Directors	Pending

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