



REFORMS INSIDE

*Publication of Higher Education
Reform Experts in Montenegro*

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FOCUS ON CLOSING SKILL GAPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MONTENEGRO - PROF. MIRA VUKČEVIĆ, UNIVERSITY OF MONTENEGRO, HERE TEAM PRESIDENT



Today's higher education is more than ever in collision with fast-changing labor market needs. We all witness the drastic change in the demands, which are becoming more and more demanding toward the graduates and their real skills. The impression is that higher education is still lagging, hidden behind the philosophy, "We are just educators: what comes after is not of our interest".

The institutions are facing the reality and a loud call for responsibility. Sooner or later, they have to confront their responsibilities and move toward introspection and self-change with the aim of bridging the skills of fresh graduates in accordance with the needs of the available fast-growing and fast-changing labor market. Close cooperation between educators and other stakeholders is the obvious solution and tool for action. One outcome of this lasting and dedicated partnership is a better understanding of the real needs and the way in which the educational offerings have to be designed. The understanding of the needs versus the design and content of the learning offer at colleges, universities, and other training institutes is crucial. Current or future cohorts of students may receive different offerings after the identification of relevant skills. If institutions fail to adapt to changing dynamics driven by technological advancements or if they fail to leverage technology to stay relevant, their programs will not attract new students, and their graduates will be underprepared for new jobs. In Montenegro, employers and educators are already pushing forward with upskilling initiatives. It's time for the government to match these efforts by investing in policies and legislation that provide flexibility, relevance, and dynamism in higher education with the aim of making it more adaptable for traditional learners as well as inclusive and accessible for a



new generation of non-traditional learners who can play an important role in bridging skill gaps in the workforce. The new law on Higher Education was adopted in 2025 and additionally fosters already rooted practices from the previous reform in place in 2017 when Montenegrin Higher Education adopted a new scheme and defined mandatory practical education. The Higher Education Institutions are legally obliged to have 30 ECTS of different forms of practical training within the undergraduate studies (180 ECTS). The problem arises from the different understandings of practical training between the institutions and scientific fields within the same institutions. Generally, the Higher Education Institutions in Montenegro have core programs that are more relevant than the elective courses, undeveloped communication with employers, and considerable inertia in education and learning, with a lack of awareness of the fast-changing demands of the labor market. Montenegro does not have a widely diversified labor market; we rather talk about a market with dominant qualifications like IT, some STEM, or economic ones, but we face the situation where the diploma's importance fades in front of the skills. The importance of non-formal or informal experience becomes an issue for policymakers and educators. Both policymakers and educators have to find the best and most adaptable model.



New strategic tendency in Montenegro, supported by the HERE team, among others, is to empower the development of a future-ready workforce by strengthening the role of universities and the new entrepreneurial mindset, which could ease the identification of skill gaps as well as the means of bridging them. This approach embraces innovative, practice-oriented teaching methodologies, closer collaboration with the business sector, and the



integration of approaches and projects that will enable learners to be competent and adaptable to the needs of future work.

We have agreed that the process of closing the skills gaps and the creation of a new, innovative, entrepreneurial university ecosystem must go side by side: What could we do at the national level?



We realized that, first of all, we have to emphasize that there is a gap between academic training and real business demands. Through the process of understanding why skills gaps occur, we will try to establish close communication with employers, accompanied by governmental actions. Dedication to the creation of a ready-for-the-future workforce must be accompanied by several self-transforming activities such as : aligning teaching with organizational goals, embracing technology and AI, identifying gaps through staff input, creating personalized learning paths, developing targeted programs, blending learning formats, offering more active mentorships, tracking progress, and leveraging digital tools.

Beside that, strategic actions should focus on the creation of a new, innovative, entrepreneurial university ecosystem by fostering lifelong education, promoting STEM education, organizing practical on-site training in industrial premises enabled through memoranda of understanding, clearly defining practical training as ECTS holders, providing incentives for the recognition of external practical training, tracking the needs of available and most frequent jobs through monitoring students' progress in external training, entrepreneurial teaching, cross-institutional integration, improved administrative support with adequate adaptable dynamics, and strategic approaches toward IP and commercialization pathways through the development of functional technology transfer offices.



The educational offer has to be delivered in a different way, with some of the goals that have to be fully reached: digital transformation and skill redefinition, introduction of practical-based learning and a learning-by-doing approach, commercially oriented research and practical training, along

with the inclusion of students in research projects starting from their early stages of study. Embrace young researchers and students within research teams and innovative projects, involve interdisciplinary approaches, embrace and embed internationalization, and promote the mobility of staff and students. Introduce the frequent dynamic of curriculum revision in accordance with real needs, both regionally and globally. Create the legal national and institutional understanding and support for the recognition of prior learning and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Define the operational dimensions of educational credentials that are valued by employers.

We have to gather around the different but interconnected topics like skills, needs, educational pathways, lifelong learning, micro-credentials and internships with the aim of making them a usual part of our higher education offer as tools for obtaining adaptable educational provision.

CLOSING THE SKILL GAPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2 -Day Seminar: “Closing Skill Gaps & Building a Future-Ready Higher Education Ecosystem” 14-15 April, 2025 Podgorica, Montenegro

The seminar brought together academic leaders, employers, and policy stakeholders to address the pressing issue of skill gaps in higher education and to explore innovative, practice-oriented teaching approaches for building entrepreneurial and future-ready institutions.

Day 1: Closing the Skill Gaps

- The day began with a foundational understanding of *why skill gaps occur*, emphasizing the disconnect between academic training and real-world demands.
- Through presentations and interactive workshops, participants explored **concrete strategies** to close these gaps, such as:
 - o Aligning education with labor market needs
 - o Leveraging digital tools, AI, and staff input
 - o Developing flexible, personalized learning paths
 - o Blending teaching formats and introducing mentorship
- A **round table discussion** with representatives from Montenegrin universities, the Chamber of Commerce, and employer associations enabled the sharing of local challenges and best practices.
- The day concluded with a session on the role of universities in **creating innovative, entrepreneurial ecosystems**, offering actionable recommendations for institutional transformation.

DEFINITION

An **entrepreneurial ecosystem** encompasses various elements that contribute to the creation, nurturing, and success of new ventures.

A **sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem** refers to the interconnected network of individuals, organizations, resources, providing **sustainability focused support** that facilitate the development, growth and transformation to a **sustainable regional economy**.

A **vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem** fosters innovation, encourages risk-taking, facilitates knowledge exchange, and provides the necessary resources and support for entrepreneurs to succeed. It helps attract talent, promotes economic growth, creates job opportunities, and drives overall development within a region or industry.

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Day 2: Teaching Mindset for the New HE Ecosystem

- Focus shifted to *pedagogical innovation*, emphasizing **practice-based teaching** as a catalyst for ecosystem change.
- Experts led participants through **case studies and exercises** to develop teaching techniques that foster creativity, critical thinking, and entrepreneurial spirit.
- A group discussion deepened the reflection on the role of educators in equipping students for an uncertain, dynamic future.
- Final recommendations focused on embedding **entrepreneurial mindset, experiential learning, and stakeholder collaboration** into HEI strategies.

AIM OF THE PROJECT

The project aims to empower the development of a ready-for-future workforce by strengthening the role of university-based entrepreneurial ecosystems in identifying and bridging skill gaps. Through innovative, practice-oriented teaching approaches, closer collaboration with industry, and the integration of entrepreneurship and technology, the project seeks to transform higher education institutions into dynamic environments that equip learners with the competencies, mindset, and adaptability required for the future of work.

SYNTHESIS

The two-day seminar focused on addressing the mismatch between higher education outcomes and labor market needs by exploring strategies to close skill gaps and foster entrepreneurial, future-ready university ecosystems. Participants engaged in expert-led workshops, case studies, and roundtable discussions with representatives from academia, industry, and policy. Key themes included aligning teaching with workforce demands, integrating technology and AI, creating personalized learning paths, and promoting mentorship and experiential learning. The seminar emphasized the critical role of universities in shaping agile, innovative learning environments through practice-based teaching and cross-sector collaboration, culminating in actionable recommendations for building inclusive, forward-looking higher education systems.

ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

The main **strengths** include:

- ✓ **Entrepreneurial teaching** is already in place at the University of Donja Gorica, providing a foundation for future-oriented learning.
- ✓ **Initiatives like the International Idea Market** actively support student entrepreneurship and inter-university collaboration.
- ✓ **AI integration in tourism services** is seen as a high-potential area, offering efficiency in planning and customer experience.
- ✓ **Active partnerships** between universities, tourism professionals, and national tourism organizations show promise for collaborative development.
- ✓ **Awareness of the need for systemic change** exists among stakeholders, with willingness to improve motivation, collaboration, and strategic planning.



☒ Recognition of sustainability and diversity as key values in ecosystem development, aligning with global development goals (SDGs).



The main **challenges** include:

☐ **Motivation issues** persist among faculty and students, often due to disconnected efforts and lack of systemic support.

☐ **Structural barriers**, such as weak infrastructure and insufficient policy support, hinder deeper university-industry collaboration.

☐ **Cultural and personal resistance** to collaboration and innovation slows down the implementation of new practices.

☐ **Fragmentation within and between universities**, including competition and lack of cross-institutional integration, impairs ecosystem synergy.

☐ **Administrative passivity and disengagement**, where problems are deferred rather than addressed, leads to stagnation.

☐ **Limited commercialization pathways** and missing strategic planning make it difficult to translate ideas into sustainable practices.

☐ **Digital transformation** and skill redefinition are still underdeveloped across faculties and curricula.

Despite the potential, there's a recognition of the complexities that need to be addressed for the well-functioning of the ecosystem.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The **main recommendations** from the provided text are:

❖ Adopt a **Multi-Level (Holistic) Ecosystem Approach** (as suggested by Theodoraki, 2024): Implement tools such as the multi-level model, and the pyramid tool to analyze and develop entrepreneurial ecosystems within universities. **Prioritize relational trust, collective action, and quality interactions between ecosystem actors** (students, faculty, administration, external partners, and international collaborators).



❖ **Integrate Fragmented Initiatives into a Unified Ecosystem:** Embed isolated initiatives (e.g. competitions, incubators, alumni engagement, co-designed curricula) into a coherent university-wide entrepreneurial strategy + Foster internal and external collaboration to optimize resource use and increase institutional impact.

❖ **Shift from Invention to Innovation:** Encourage professors to go beyond research outputs by commercializing inventions, fostering market-driven innovation, and promoting team-based entrepreneurial learning. Cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset that values both academic excellence and practical market application.



❖ **Incorporate Gamification and Experiential Learning:** Use gamified elements, competitions, and creative group work to build energy and foster engagement in entrepreneurship education. Initiate programs like the [Developing Entrepreneurial Mindsets, Ideas, and Opportunities: A Guide for Educators](#) and develop structured experiential curricula.



❖ **Support Faculty Transformation:** Build interdisciplinary faculty teams to coach entrepreneurial projects and redesign teaching to include strategic, organizational, and innovation components. Address workload challenges by promoting collaborative teaching models and providing AI-enabled support tools.



❖ **Embed Internationalization and Student Mobility:** Strengthen and measure the impact of international collaborations, exchange programs, and competitions. Valorise these efforts by showcasing success stories and quantifying engagement (number of participants, outcomes, follow-ups).

❖ **Clarify and Institutionalize AI Usage in Education:** Create clear AI policies for classroom use, emphasizing responsible usage, ethics, authorship, and student development. Train educators and students to leverage AI tools as learning enhancers, not as replacements, with exercises and sessions focusing on critical thinking.

❖ **Revise Curriculum for Real-World Impact:** Integrate entrepreneurial and innovation-based learning into existing modules through hands-on projects and partnerships (e.g., technopoles, industry).

❖ **Promote Inclusive and Sustainable Ecosystems:** Encourage sustainable, inclusive ecosystems by sharing best practices across institutions and promoting diversity in participation. Define clear KPIs for ecosystem engagement (e.g., number of participants, supported startups, faculty involvement).

These recommendations emphasize the importance of collaboration, practical partnerships, evaluation, and contextual understanding in building and nurturing entrepreneurial university ecosystems.





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THE HIGHER EDUCATION LAW THROUGH THE LENS OF PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

Dragica Anđelić, University Mediterranean, HERE team member

The new Higher Education Law (Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 122/25) had been eagerly waited for many years, with great expectations. The previous education system failed to meet the needs of the labor market, as undergraduate programs were limited to three years (180 ECTS) and master's programs to two years (120 ECTS), which negatively impacted higher education institutions, employers and students in Montenegro. In this context, the new legal framework - offering greater flexibility in shaping the duration and structure of academic study programs - represents a significant advancement. Undergraduate study programs can now vary between 180 and 240 ECTS credits, while postgraduate study programs encompass specialist study programs of 60 ECTS and master's study programs ranging from 60 to 120 ECTS. The duration and scope of integrated undergraduate, master's and doctoral studies programs remain unchanged. Additionally, a provision allows students in two-year master's studies to obtain a specialist diploma upon completing 60 ECTS. The issuance of a specialist degree is required, reflecting a thoughtful approach to the needs of the labor market, which overall, has the greatest demand for highly educated professionals with a four-year university degree.

The quality of study programs at all levels is evaluated annually through student surveys. Under the previous law, the Agency was responsible for prescribing the content of the student survey. However, the new law introduces a positive change, stating that the Agency no longer prescribes the content but instead offers an opinion on it. Since the purpose of this self-evaluation method is for institutions to assess student satisfaction with their study programs and based on this feedback, independently develop tools or measures to ensure

and improve quality. Having in mind that these are internal procedures, I believe it was essential for the responsibility of designing the student survey content to be fully entrusted to the institutions themselves.

Significant improvements in the new Law relate to Lifelong Learning Programs - introducing changes concerning lifelong learning programs, which are realized through micro-credential programs and programs for acquiring micro-qualifications. The entire regulation on micro-credentials has been entrusted to institutions, from defining learning outcomes to assessing knowledge, skills and competencies as well as issuing certificates to participants confirming they have attended a specific study program. This increases the institutions' ability to deepen cooperation and establish stronger connections with interested employers, enabling them to respond more quickly to the demanding needs of the labor market, which are driven by technological progress through digital transformation. The absence of micro-credential validation through procedures by competent authorities and bodies outside the university presents an opportunity to respond more efficiently, in a shorter timeframe, to the needs of participants who require new knowledge of limited scope, regardless of whether they are employed or seeking employment. Furthermore, the introduction of micro-credentials into higher education provides an opportunity for current students to enhance their knowledge, and for the entire academic community to experience the benefits of the challenges offered by the creation and implementation of such lifelong learning programs.

In accordance with the Bologna Declaration, university autonomy implies independence as well as

the responsibility and capacity of Higher Education Institutions to manage academic, organizational and other activities autonomously. They have the freedom to choose the study programs they will offer, conduct research and make selection for academic positions, all while being fully responsible for the quality of education. A number of legal provisions interfere with the autonomy of higher education institutions. The state defines exam periods and general enrollment conditions (Articles 97 and 99 of the Higher Education Law). Although Article 99 of the Higher Education Law defines the general conditions for enrollment in undergraduate studies, i.e., access to higher education, the state also seeks additional regulation through the Ministry responsible for higher education, which is expected to issue a general act defining the specific enrollment criteria, the same for all higher education institutions. In this way, institutions are excluded from any decision-making regarding the definition of conditions and criteria for enrollment in undergraduate studies.

Defining the conditions and criteria for selection for academic positions, in accordance with Article 126 of the Law is given to the Council for Higher Education. Thus, the state has intervened in a number of significant processes and policies that according to the principle of autonomy, should be managed by universities. With the above-mentioned provisions, higher education institutions are deprived of control over academic processes and policies. As a result, studying at private institutions, due to the indicated unification, loses its appeal, especially since smaller institutions may have had a comparative advantage over the State University, the largest higher education institution in Montenegro. Private higher education institutions had hoped for the removal of key barriers to their efficient functioning, which would involve eliminating discriminatory provisions and strengthening quality assurance mechanisms in accordance with European standards and guidelines for ensuring quality in higher education. However, the new law has significantly reduced the rights,

competencies, and autonomy of private institutions in several key areas, limiting their role in higher education, which is legally defined as an activity of public interest.

The provision on financial guarantees is particularly problematic, as it is imposed on private institutions as a discriminatory obligation¹ without clear professional or European justification. The provision on financial guarantees, as stated in Article 24 of the Law, deviates from European standards and guidelines for ensuring quality in higher education (European Standards and Guidelines - ESG), which are based on transparent accreditation and reaccreditation procedures, external and internal evaluations, and the independence and transparency of agencies responsible for quality assurance. The ESG focus solely on quality processes and procedures, not on financial guarantees, capital, assets, or similar requirements.

The provision regarding financial guarantees is particularly problematic, as it imposes a discriminatory obligation on private institutions without clear professional or European justification. As outlined in Article 24 of the Law, this provision diverges from the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG), which emphasize transparent accreditation and reaccreditation processes, external and internal evaluations, and the independence and transparency of the agencies responsible for quality assurance. The ESG guidelines focus solely on quality assurance processes and procedures, rather than on financial guarantees, capital, assets, or similar requirements.

Requiring private institutions to provide proof of time-deposited financial resources in commercial banks—equivalent to the funds needed to implement a study program—when establishing an institution and/or introducing new study programs, as well as to issue a guarantee for the duration of the program, introduces a practice that does not align

1 The state has confirmed its discriminatory stance towards private higher education institutions through the adoption of the Law on the Ratification of the Agreement on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in the Western Balkans ("Official Gazette of Montenegro – International Agreements, No. 11/23") and the Law on the Ratification of the Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Studies in the Western Balkans ("Official Gazette of Montenegro – International Agreements, No. 8/25"). Both laws apply only to accredited public institutions.



with contemporary European standards. This mechanism is not recognized as a tool for ensuring quality in the European higher education space. It limits competition and puts private institutions at a disadvantage compared to public ones, as only private institutions are subject to this obligation.

The financial guarantee also has additional repercussions on the key positive legal innovation regarding the study model previously discussed, as the new study model will be very restrictively applied to private higher education institutions, due to the enormous funds that need to be secured for the financial guarantee. As a result, private institutions will largely remain confined by the constraints of the previously existing study model. Furthermore, the costs associated with time-deposited funds and bank guarantees will inevitably be passed on to students in the form of higher tuition fees, directly reducing the accessibility of education.

Additionally, the new Law abolished the previous provision on financing students at private institutions offering study programs not available at public institutions, further reinforcing the notion that, regardless of what private higher education institutions offer, they cannot be seen as counterparts to public institutions. This relationship implies a lack of trust in processes managed by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AQAHE) and the external experts involved in accreditation and reaccreditation procedures. A review of practices in the region shows that such a requirement is not included in the legislation of neighboring countries. This makes Montenegro an exception and could potentially harm the competitiveness and attractiveness of its educational system, even in neighboring countries. Moreover, private higher education institutions are not permitted to operate outside their headquarters, whereas public institutions are allowed to do so under certain conditions.

It can be concluded that the New Higher Education Law brings certain improvements in terms of flexibility in the study model and the development of lifelong learning programs, especially through micro-credentials and micro-qualifications, which

should have a positive impact on the labor market and facilitate employment for graduates. However, a significant number of legal provisions undermine the autonomy of higher education institutions, narrowing the space for independently creating enrollment and other academic processes and policies. The provisions that specifically affect private institutions are especially problematic, as they impose financial guarantees, restrict their activities, and deny them equal standing with the public sector. This undermines the competitiveness of private universities, increases the financial burden on students, and violates the principle of equal treatment for all higher education institutions, potentially diminishing the overall quality and accessibility of higher education in Montenegro.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS - A MODERN APPROACH TO LEARNING, EMPLOYABILITY, AND LIFELONG EDUCATION

prof. Dijana Vučković, University of Montenegro, HERE team member

INTRODUCTION

★ In contemporary society, the rapid development of science and technology, which brings significant changes to the labor market as well as to lifestyles, requires flexible, targeted, and fast ways of acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies. Traditional degrees obtained through formal education remain important, but they often do not fully meet the dynamic needs of the modern labor market, especially regarding digital, technological, and so-called green competencies (competencies in the field of sustainable development). For this reason, the concept of micro-credentials is increasingly being applied in Europe and around the world, representing a complement to formal education in supporting lifelong learning, employability, and professional development.

★ Individuals face the need for continuous learning, reskilling, and upskilling on a daily basis (in Council Recommendation, 2022 – *continuous upskilling and reskilling*), which makes the concept of micro-credentials increasingly significant, almost indispensable. Micro-credentials allow individuals to acquire specific competences through short, targeted, and flexible educational courses, training, and modules. They serve as a bridge between formal and non-formal education and provide evidence of competencies that are immediately applicable in the labor market while supporting lifelong learning. However, as already mentioned, micro-credentials do not have to respond exclusively to labor market demands – they should also help people to develop their personal, social, cultural, and professional

knowledge, skills, and competencies (Council Recommendation, 2022).

WHAT ARE MICRO-CREDENTIALS?

It is important to note that there is no single definition of micro-credentials, as highlighted in the Council Recommendations of 2022. Nevertheless, the mentioned document provides key elements for describing micro-credentials. It emphasizes that a micro-credential is a formal record of learning outcomes that a person has acquired through a short educational program or activity, with clearly defined assessment criteria and quality standards. In other words, it is a brief record or certificate of specific knowledge and skills, which allows for quick verification of competencies and their potential integration into formal or non-formal learning pathways (Council Recommendations, 2022).

Unlike formal degrees or qualifications, micro-credentials focus on specific skills and tasks, and are acquired through short modules, courses, online programs, or other specialized training. They are often combined into so-called “stackable micro-credentials” to form larger competencies or credentials (Microcredentials.eu, 2023). Micro-credentials can complement formal degrees or build upon them, but they are by no means a replacement, or, as highlighted in the Council Recommendations (2022): *They can, where appropriate, complement*

existing qualifications, providing added value while not undermining the core principle of full degree programmes in initial education and training.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS

Defined Learning Outcomes and Assessment Methods

Micro-credentials are based on clearly defined learning outcomes, described in the same way as in any other educational context. They should represent statements about what a person knows and can do after completing the program. Learning outcomes, as is generally the case, are assessed through measurable and transparent criteria, enabling validation of actual competencies by employers and educational institutions. Learning outcomes are, therefore, the central or leading part of a micro-credential, clearly stating the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and/or competencies acquired in a program developed in the form of a micro-credential.

Smaller Scope and Flexibility

Programs leading to micro-credentials are shorter than traditional study programs and are designed to be completed within time frames suitable for employees, adult learners, or individuals seeking reskilling or upskilling. In the new Law on Higher Education in Montenegro (2025), it is foreseen that a micro-credential can have a scope of up to 15 ECTS, thus defining the time that can be devoted to the course. Learning flexibility also includes online learning, self-paced learning, and blended methods (Microcredentials.eu, 2023).

Transparency and Portability

Digital tools allow easy sharing, validation, and transfer of micro-credentials, enabling individuals to showcase their competencies to employers and other educational institutions. The European approach includes digital platforms such as Europass, which

facilitate the management and presentation of evidence of competencies.

The recommendations on the European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (Council Recommendation, 2022) also state what each micro-credential must contain. Each micro-credential must include: identification of the learner, title of the micro-credential, country(ies)/region(s) of the issuer, awarding body(ies), date of issuing, learning outcomes, workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS, wherever possible), level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable, type of assessment, form of participation in the learning activity, type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential (Council Recommendation, 2022).

In addition to the mandatory elements, the following elements are proposed as optional: prerequisites needed to enroll in the learning activity, supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online, or onsite with identity verification), grade achieved, integration/stackability options (stand-alone, independent micro-credential/integrated, stackable towards another credential) (Council Recommendation, 2022).

EXAMPLES OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS IMPLEMENTATION IN COUNTRIES AND INSTITUTIONS

In Austria, national advisory groups are developing strategies to integrate micro-credentials into higher and adult education, following European standards (EPALE - European Commission, 2023). In Slovenia, efforts are underway to establish a micro-credential system in higher education, integrating it into national frameworks and promoting its use in both formal and non-formal education (OECD STIP Compass, 2022). Finland, Spain, and Slovakia have already developed policies and initiatives tailored to their national contexts, enabling the practical implementation of micro-credentials in educational and professional systems (OECD, 2022).

European university networks, such as Una Europa, have developed joint frameworks for micro-credentials, allowing students to gain recognized evidence of skills through cooperation across multiple institutions (Una Europa, 2023). Programs like EU-CONEXUS use micro-credentials for training in digital and green skills, enabling students to enhance competencies relevant to the labor market (EU-CONEXUS, 2023).

In Montenegro, micro-credentials have only recently been included in the legislative framework, although they were previously developed through projects focused on teachers' professional development and education quality, in accordance with European design and implementation principles (cred4teach.eu, 2023).

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING MICRO-CREDENTIALS

Like any innovation in education, micro-credentials potentially bring both benefits and possible risks. In a text of this scope and purpose, it is not possible to analyze in detail the potential implications of micro-credentials in education, but it is realistic to highlight at least a few obvious recommendations and challenges. The advantages of micro-credentials certainly include:

- Enhancing flexibility and accessibility of learning. Courses, seminars, and other trainings that represent smaller learning units can be much more easily made flexible in terms of time, place, and learning environment. This makes learning more accessible for individuals who are already employed and cannot, like regular students, dedicate a 40-hour week to study.

- Better alignment of education with labor market needs. Regular, formal studies often impose a heavy workload on students, with content directly related to their qualifications for a specific profession. Universities, under pressure from employers, often face the dilemma of whether to adapt teaching to what is currently demanded by the labor market (risking that students may not acquire many basic knowledge elements of the profession, as defined by their qualification) or to consistently adhere to the requirements of future student diplomas which also define the level and content of the qualification. It is clear that universities must respect the qualification, and thus the essence of the profession, which often leads to employer dissatisfaction. Micro-credentials offer a good way to achieve better alignment between higher education and the labor market.

- Support for lifelong learning and workforce mobility. Lifelong learning is already a well-established concept, and it is clear that it needs to be supported with all available resources.



- Easier transparency and verification of skills for employers. Since micro-credentials are initially intended for adults already engaged in work processes (this does not mean that other categories cannot use them), they are most often focused on concrete skills required in practice. In this regard, employers have a very clear picture of whether someone has successfully completed the training.

However, challenges still exist:

- Need for quality standards, or at least the adaptation of ESG standards to micro-credentials, as a requirement for validation.

- Variability in legal frameworks among countries. Micro-credentials should be transferable, so it is important to have at least some unified factors that enable this.

- Institutional autonomy in defining micro-credentials. On one hand, this autonomy is a great advantage, as it allows proactive institutions to offer up-to-date programs, but it may also have negative consequences regarding the recognition of micro-credentials by other institutions or employers.

- Need for recognition and evaluation of micro-credentials across a broader spectrum of educational and professional systems.

CONCLUSION

Micro-credentials are an important and modern tool of educational policy that contributes to flexible learning, better employability, and lifelong careers. They are particularly relevant in the context of rapid changes in the labor market and the demand for digital, green, and other specialized competencies. European countries and networks of institutions are actively working on the implementation, standardization, and recognition of micro-credentials, while Montenegro and the region are beginning to develop frameworks that will enable and integrate them into national education systems.

Micro-credentials represent a flexible and innovative approach to acquiring competencies, allowing for faster adaptation to labor market requirements and individual educational needs. Their integration into formal and non-formal education strengthens the bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, promotes lifelong learning, and facilitates mobility of students and professionals within and between countries. Although implementation varies across countries and institutions, common frameworks, standards, and European initiatives contribute to the recognition and quality of micro-credentials, thus laying the foundation for future innovations in educational and professional systems.



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RECOGNITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ACADEMIC RECOGNITION, MOBILITY AND THE MONTENEGRIN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

Recognition in higher education (HE) is a fundamental mechanism for ensuring transparency, fairness and permeability of educational pathways within and across national systems. As international student mobility, cross-border education and diversified learning trajectories continue to expand, academic recognition has become a core policy concern for higher education institutions (HEIs), national authorities and international organizations (Teichler, 2017). At its core, academic recognition refers to the formal acceptance of periods of study, credits or qualifications obtained in one institutional or national context for the purpose of further education in another.

Within Europe, recognition practices have been profoundly shaped by the Bologna Process, the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the introduction of instruments such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). At the same time, the recognition of foreign qualifications and diplomas remains a complex and often contested process, influenced by legal frameworks, institutional autonomy, quality assurance mechanisms and levels of trust between systems (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997).

This article examines academic recognition in HE from both a theoretical and policy-oriented perspective, with particular attention to ECTS, student mobility and the recognition of foreign qualifications. It further analyses the Montenegrin context as a case that illustrates the tensions between formal alignment with European standards

and persistent challenges in implementation. By integrating the national perspective into the broader European framework, the article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of recognition as both a technical and a normative process.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS OF RECOGNITION

In HE, recognition is commonly defined as the formal validation of learning outcomes, academic achievements or qualifications by a competent authority (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997). Academic recognition specifically concerns recognition for the purpose of access to further studies, progression within a study program or transfer of credits between institutions.

The literature distinguishes between academic recognition and professional recognition, the latter referring to access to regulated professions and labour markets. While conceptually distinct, these forms of recognition are closely interconnected, particularly in the case of foreign qualifications, where academic recognition often constitutes a prerequisite for professional recognition (Rauhvargers, 2004).

A central normative principle underpinning recognition in Europe is that of recognition unless substantial differences can be demonstrated. Introduced by the Lisbon Recognition Convention, this principle represents a shift away from rigid equivalence toward a more flexible, learner-centred approach based on learning outcomes and levels of qualification (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997).

However, as subsequent sections demonstrate, the practical application of this principle remains uneven.

ACADEMIC RECOGNITION, ECTS AND THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The Bologna Process constitutes the most comprehensive regional effort to harmonize HE systems and facilitate academic recognition. Since its launch in 1999, it has sought to enhance comparability, transparency and trust through common degree structures, quality assurance standards and recognition instruments (European Ministers of Education, 1999).

ECTS is a central technical tool within this framework. As a learner-centred system based on learning outcomes and student workload, ECTS enables the transfer and accumulation of credits across institutions and national borders. Sixty ECTS credits typically correspond to one full-time academic year, providing a common reference point for recognition decisions (European Commission, 2015).

In the context of student mobility, ECTS is complemented by instruments such as Learning Agreements (LA), Transcripts of Records (ToR) and the Diploma Supplement (DS). When applied consistently, these tools are intended to ensure that credits earned abroad are recognised without academic loss. However, research indicates that formal adoption of ECTS does not automatically translate into effective recognition practices (Kehm, 2010). Differences in grading cultures, curriculum design and institutional interpretations of learning outcomes continue to pose significant barriers.

RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS AND DIPLOMAS

Recognition of foreign qualifications and diplomas represents a crucial dimension of recognition in HE, particularly in increasingly globalised educational and labour markets. In Europe, this process is guided by the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997) and supported by national ENIC-NARIC centres, which provide authoritative information and guidance on foreign education systems (UNESCO, 2019).

Modern recognition practices emphasize comparability rather than strict equivalence, focusing on the level, learning outcomes, workload and quality assurance of the foreign qualification (Rauhvargers, 2004). Nevertheless, recognition procedures often remain administratively complex, time-consuming and insufficiently transparent from the perspective of applicants.

These challenges are particularly pronounced in smaller or less internationally visible HE systems, where limited institutional capacity and experience with diverse foreign qualifications may lead to risk-averse recognition decisions.

ACADEMIC RECOGNITION IN MONTENEGRO: ALIGNMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Montenegro provides an illustrative case of a HE system that is formally well aligned with European recognition frameworks, yet continues to face notable challenges in implementation. Montenegro joined the Bologna Process in 2003 and has since incorporated its core principles into national legislation and institutional practices.

The Law on Higher Education establishes ECTS as



a mandatory credit system and explicitly promotes academic mobility and recognition of qualifications as key objectives of the HE system (Government of Montenegro, 2025). Montenegro has also aligned its Montenegrin Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework, providing a formal basis for learning-outcomes-based recognition (Government of Montenegro, 2025).

At the institutional level, HEIs are responsible for recognizing study periods, credits and partial qualifications. HEIs responsibility is also recognition of foreign diplomas for the purpose of further education, which is regulated at the national level. Recognition for employment purposes is handled by the ENIC/NARIC centre within the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation, reflecting the functional distinction common in European systems.

RECOGNITION OF STUDY PERIODS AND STUDENT MOBILITY: PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Despite this formal alignment, recognition of parts of study programs, such as periods of mobility or credits earned prior to institutional transfer, remains one of the most challenging aspects of academic recognition in Montenegro. While institutional regulations typically reference international conventions and ECTS principles, their practical application often requires individual case-by-case assessment.

A recurring problem concerns insufficient or non-standardised information about courses completed at foreign institutions. Lack of detailed data on learning outcomes, course content or assessment methods complicates comparability and often results in a return to formal course-by-course equivalencing, rather than outcomes-based recognition. This practice runs counter to Bologna principles and undermines the intended flexibility of ECTS.

Institutional fragmentation further exacerbates these challenges. In multi-faculty universities,

recognition procedures may vary significantly across faculties, leading to inconsistent decisions and unequal treatment of students. The absence of unified databases and standardised data entry practices weakens transparency and limits the systematic use of the DS.

THE ROLE OF LEARNING AGREEMENTS AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Within this context, the LA emerges as a critical yet underutilised instrument. When properly prepared and approved prior to mobility, the LA serves as a binding academic contract that should guarantee full recognition of agreed learning outcomes. However, insufficient awareness among students and academic staff regarding the legal and academic significance of the LA reduces its effectiveness.

All three parties – students, faculty members, and university administration, particularly vice-deans and offices for international cooperation – need to demonstrate a high degree of responsibility, flexibility and understanding when arranging mobility and preparing LAs. Students should carefully select courses for their mobility, ensuring that they are compatible and complementary with their study program or be aware that otherwise mobility courses will be addition to their degree, i.e. additional credits to their qualification. Faculty members must realise that they do not “own” their courses and, therefore, are not the sole authorities in deciding on the recognition of students’ work during mobility. Recognition should be grounded in learning outcomes rather than in subjective evaluation by individual professors. The role of vice-deans and offices for international cooperation is equally important, both in providing guidance and support to students and in facilitating communication between students and faculty regarding recognition matters.

Strengthening institutional capacity through targeted training and professional development is therefore essential and will be crucial for





sustainable development in this field (Wächter, 2019). Recognition cannot be treated solely as an administrative task; it requires academic judgment, familiarity with international frameworks and a shared institutional commitment to learner-centred principles. At the same time, recognition policies must remain grounded in core academic values, ensuring that quality assurance, fairness, and inclusiveness are upheld.

RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN DIPLOMAS: NATIONAL-LEVEL TENSIONS



Recognition of foreign diplomas and qualifications presents additional challenges in the Montenegrin context. These challenges are particularly visible in cases involving graduates of internationally recognised secondary education systems, who may face barriers to admission to Montenegrin universities despite being eligible for entry to highly ranked institutions abroad.

Such cases reveal tensions between rigid national admission frameworks and the principles of outcomes-based recognition. Similarly, recognition decisions based primarily on formal degree titles or ECTS volume, rather than on learning outcomes and program content, risk contradicting the spirit of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997).



OUTWARD RECOGNITION AND INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION

From the perspective of outward recognition, Montenegrin qualifications often encounter difficulties in achieving efficient recognition abroad. One contributing factor is the limited presence of internationally accredited study programs. International accreditations – such as so called “triple crown” in business education, assuming the three most prestigious global accreditations: AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA – significantly enhance the credibility and global recognition of qualifications.

Expanding international accreditation would not only improve domestic quality assurance but also reduce uncertainty for foreign recognition authorities, thereby strengthening graduate mobility and employability.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES AND CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The Montenegrin case highlights a broader issue in European HE: the gap between formal policy alignment and effective implementation of recognition principles. Digitalization of recognition procedures, standardised data management and stronger institutional cooperation are necessary but insufficient without a corresponding shift in academic culture.

Recognition must be understood as a trust-based process that balances quality assurance with openness and flexibility. Overly restrictive or formalistic practices risk undermining mobility, inclusion and the credibility of recognition frameworks themselves.

CONCLUSION

Recognition in HE is a cornerstone of academic mobility, international cooperation and equitable access to education. European frameworks such as the Bologna Process, ECTS and the Lisbon Recognition Convention have provided a strong normative and technical foundation for academic recognition.

The Montenegrin experience demonstrates that formal alignment with these frameworks, while necessary, is not sufficient. Persistent challenges in institutional capacity, information availability and procedural consistency continue to limit the full realisation of recognition principles. Addressing these challenges requires sustained commitment at both policy and institutional levels, as well as a stronger emphasis on learner-centred and outcomes-based recognition. That would be the proper path for achieving goals of national HE development strategy (Government of Montenegro, 2024)

By critically examining recognition practices within both European and national contexts, this article underscores the importance of moving beyond formal compliance toward genuinely transparent, fair and trust-based recognition systems.

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MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FOR A CHANGING EUROPE

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Contemporary societies and economies are undergoing profound transformations driven by what is often described as a state of polycrisis: the simultaneous occurrence of economic uncertainty, technological disruption, demographic evolution, climate change, and geopolitical instability. These developments are reshaping labour markets and societal needs. In this context, education systems are under growing pressure to adapt more rapidly than traditional degree structures typically allow.

The well-being of society increasingly depends on citizens who possess so-called twenty-first century competencies: the ability to create new forms of value, take responsibility in complex environments, and navigate tensions and dilemmas rather than seek simple solutions. Higher education therefore faces a dual challenge. On the one hand, it must respond to rapidly changing skill demands associated with technological and economic change. On the other, it must continue to support broader societal goals related to democratic participation, social cohesion, and critical citizenship.



A PARADIGM-SHIFT TOWARDS FLEXIBLE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Flexible learning has emerged as one response to these pressures. At policy level, this turn is visible in a range of European and international initiatives, including the European Skills Agenda (European Commission, 2020), the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (Council of the European Union, 2022), the OECD Education Policy Perspective (OECD, 2021), and UNESCO's work on lifelong learning systems (UNESCO, 2021). Broadly defined, flexible learning refers to learner-centred approaches that adapt learning pathways, formats, and pacing to the needs of diverse learners. Rather than expecting learners to conform to fixed institutional structures, flexible learning seeks to adapt provision to learners' circumstances, goals, and prior experiences.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FLEXIBLE LEARNING AND BLENDED LEARNING

Flexible learning is often confused with blended learning, but the two concepts are not synonymous. Blended learning is typically defined as a deliberate mix of online and face-to-face teaching and learning activities. While this mix can enhance flexibility, blended learning remains focused on a teacher-driven delivery mode.

Flexible learning may include multiple delivery formats such as fully online courses, classroom-





based teaching, and hybrid or blended models. It may offer different time options, allowing learners to engage synchronously with instructors and peers, asynchronously through recorded or self-directed activities, or at their own pace over extended periods. A modular approach enables learners to accumulate learning in smaller units that can be combined or “stacked” over time, while personalised curricula allow learners to tailor pathways to their professional or personal goals. Lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning, including informal and non-formal experience, are integral components of this broader conception of flexibility.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING HAS MANY BENEFICIARIES

Flexible learning pathways are particularly beneficial for several groups of learners. Working students often need to balance study with employment, making rigid schedules and attendance requirements difficult to manage. Flexible provision enables them to engage with learning without sacrificing income or career progression. The same holds true for caregiving students who can manage spending time with their families.

Flexible learning also supports reskilling, where learners seek to acquire new competencies in a different domain, often in response to labour market disruption or career change. In such cases, learners typically require quick, targeted learning opportunities rather than full degree programmes. Similarly, upskilling learners pursue personal or professional growth within their existing field and benefit from short, focused learning experiences that can be integrated into ongoing work.



Non-traditional students, including those returning to education later in life or without a prior academic background, may face psychological, financial, or structural barriers to participation in conventional higher education. Flexible learning can lower these barriers by offering alternative entry routes, recognising existing knowledge and experience, and providing learning environments that are more compatible with adult learners’ lives.



EU PRIORITIZES FLEXIBLE LEARNING TO ADDRESS LABOUR MARKET AND SOCIETAL NEEDS

At European level, flexible learning and short courses are increasingly linked to policy priorities related to employability, competitiveness, and social inclusion. Key reference points include the European Skills Agenda (European Commission, 2020), the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials (Council of the European Union, 2022), and the Union of Skills (European Commission, 2025).

Economic arguments are often cited in support of flexible learning, short courses and micro-credentials. These include the need for quick skill development in fast-changing industries, the ability to respond rapidly to emerging market trends, and support for individuals navigating career transitions. Flexible learning pathways can also increase accessibility to higher education by enabling participation from groups that have traditionally been underrepresented. By aligning education more closely with local labour market and community needs, higher education institutions can contribute to regional economic development and social resilience.



However, it is important to emphasise that short courses and flexible learning are not solely instruments of economic and labour market policy. They also play a role in supporting the development of informed and cultivated citizens. For example, quick skill development may include competencies such as identifying misinformation, distinguishing facts from opinions, and navigating the contemporary information environment. The Council of Europe (2018, 2025) compiled such competencies for a democratic culture, which should be part of any higher education program, including VET.



In addition, increased accessibility can support the integration of migrant populations and foster social cohesion. More broadly, flexible learning can contribute to community and economic development by supporting lifelong civic engagement and fostering a democratic culture.

IMPLEMENTATION OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Implementation is not just a technical challenge, but also an organisational and cultural one. It requires whole-institution approaches, cross-unit coordination, and alignment with quality assurance frameworks.

Content flexibility is often achieved through modular and customisable curricula. This allows learners to select learning units aligned with their needs, but it also raises challenges related to coherence and progression. Institutions must ensure that modular offerings are underpinned by clear learning outcomes and pathways.

Place flexibility includes online, hybrid, and classroom-based teaching. Each mode has implications for infrastructure, staff workload, and learner support.

Entry requirements can be made more flexible through open access policies and recognition of prior learning, but this necessitates transparent and fair assessment processes by well qualified staff.

Learning support, including tutoring, peer collaboration, and technical assistance, becomes particularly important in flexible and online environments. Finally, assessment practices may range from continuous and formative approaches to more traditional summative assessments, depending on the learning objectives and certification requirements.

A CHANGE IN THE ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE

As seen from the above, the change towards flexible learning represents a significant paradigm shift in the academic landscape and is therefore encountering multiple challenges within universities. These include the need for increased technical capacity and digital infrastructure for new teaching methods, which places a financial burden

on institutions. Limited awareness of emerging skill needs can make it difficult to design relevant training offers, while disciplinary silos may hinder interdisciplinary and modular approaches.

Institutions often lack consensus about best practice in flexible learning and micro-credentials, and responsibilities may be dispersed across departments, central services, and external partners. This fragmentation can slow down decision-making and implementation.

At the same time, several enablers can support successful implementation. Partnerships with employers or their sectorial associations can help ensure relevance and credibility. Subject matter experts, on the other hand, contribute disciplinary depth. Pedagogical and educational technology support are critical for high-quality learning design, and UX design can enhance usability and learner experience. Overall success also depends on engaging leadership. Leadership champions play a key role in articulating a shared vision and legitimising innovation within institutional cultures.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Flexible learning, as previously described, necessitates suitable formal structures, and micro-credentials are a key component in this framework.

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS

To support policy coherence across countries, a shared definition of micro-credentials has been articulated at European level to enhance consistency, trust, and portability across systems (Council of the European Union, 2022):

“Micro-credential” 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 micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials 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.”

Micro-credentials occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of flexible learning and formal qualification frameworks. They are simultaneously learning opportunities and credentials.

Micro-credentials as learning opportunities entail a modest amount of learning evaluated against straightforward and clearly defined criteria. Designed to provide learners with specific knowledge, skills, and competencies that respond to societal, personal, cultural, or labour market needs, they are a valuable resource. They can be used as stand-alone learning units or combined into larger ones. To ensure trust and comparability, quality assurance processes are

expected to follow agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.

Micro-credentials serve as credentials by providing a record of learning outcomes owned by the learner. They can be shared, are portable across institutions, and may be accumulated over time. This dual nature distinguishes micro-credentials from informal short courses that do not carry formal recognition.

LINK TO THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK AND ECTS

Within the European context, micro-credentials are increasingly aligned with existing qualification frameworks, notably the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), as outlined in the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials (Council of the European Union, 2022, Annex I and Annex II). Typical workloads range from 100 to 150 hours of learning, corresponding to approximately 4–6 ECTS credits. They are commonly positioned at levels 6 (bachelor) to 7 (master) of the European and National Qualifications Frameworks, with some offers at level 5.

Assessment enables the award of academic credit, either following successful completion of the course or through recognition of prior learning. In case of online or distant teaching, reliable methods of identity verification at the point of assessment are required to maintain trust. Comprehensive documentation specifies learning outcomes, study hours, EQF level, and earned credit points, thereby promoting transparency and recognition.

The European Digital Credential for Learning (Europass, 2018) is a digital version of micro-credentials that higher education institutions can issue in all EU and Europass languages. It is signed with an electronic seal, making it verifiable.

PEDAGOGY AND LEARNING PATHS FOR MICRO-CREDENTIAL PROGRAMS

PEDAGOGY OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS

Pedagogical quality is central to the credibility and sustainability of micro-credentials, and effective micro-credential teaching must take into account several characteristic features of this learning context.

 Micro-credentials are more often pursued by adult learners than teenagers. As learners get older, they think about the pros and cons of making a commitment, become less dependent on others, and are more open to intrinsic motivation. Cohorts in online courses are often large, and teacher–learner ratios may be relatively low. Learners frequently have work and care commitments that take precedence over study, and that influence how and when they engage. As a result, learning is often predominantly asynchronous.

The focus of micro-credentials is commonly on career, workplace, and professional skills, and learners may bring substantial relevant work experience. At the same time, some learners may be new to online learning, or their learning experience may be in the distant past. They require structured opportunities to interact with others and engage efficiently in learning processes. Support for the development of self-regulation skills is therefore critical. 

 Micro-credential learners following Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are often geographically dispersed across many countries, adding further complexity to learning design. Finally, many learners wish to stack micro-credentials to form larger qualifications, which has implications for curriculum coherence and progression.

These characteristics require highly qualified teaching staff. Since micro-credential programs are

a recent addition to higher education and many teachers lack experience with them, institutions would be wise to establish academic development programs. 

STEPS TOWARDS A MICRO-CREDENTIAL PROGRAMME

Developing a micro-credential programme typically involves several steps. The first is articulating a clear vision that aligns institutional mission, learner needs, and policy priorities. This is followed by the development of a competency framework that defines the capabilities learners are expected to acquire.

Intended learning outcomes must then be specified, providing the basis for course design and assessment. The construction of courses involves decisions about content, pedagogy, delivery mode, and assessment strategies. Finally, audit and review processes are required to ensure quality, consistency, and alignment with external standards.

Stackability is a core component of the European approach to micro-credentials, linked to progression and learner empowerment. The central aim is to coordinate comprehensive offerings that enable learners to accumulate learning towards more substantial qualifications over time. Micro-credential roadmapping should therefore be an integral part of the learning offer, supporting a more agile, flexible, and stackable approach to training and professional development.

This approach implies that micro-credentials earned at one institution are recognised by others, creating potential for joint programming and collaboration across the higher education sector.

It is important to note that micro-credentials can be linked to traditional degree programmes in multiple ways. They may function as on-ramp training, preparing learners for entry into formal degree study. They can be used as mechanisms for recognising prior learning within a degree programme, reducing duplication and time to completion. They may also



be embedded within degree programmes as discrete, credit-bearing components, or offered as post-degree qualifications that support ongoing professional development. These multiple linkages highlight the potential of micro-credentials to act as connective tissue between flexible learning and traditional higher education structures.



CONCLUSION

Flexible learning and micro-credentials are interconnected responses to the changing social, economic, and policy context facing higher education in Europe. Against a backdrop of polycrisis, rapid technological change, and evolving labour market demands, flexible learning pathways offer higher education institutions a means to widen their public, support lifelong learning, and respond more effectively to diverse learner needs. Micro-credentials, when designed and implemented in line with European policy frameworks, provide a concrete mechanism for operationalising flexibility while maintaining academic standards, transparency, and trust.

A central message is that flexible learning and micro-credentials should not be understood solely as short-term solutions to skills shortages. While employability and reskilling are important drivers, policy frameworks at European and international level also emphasise broader societal objectives, including social inclusion, democratic participation, and the development of informed and critical citizens. For higher education institutions, this implies a need to balance responsiveness to labour market signals with their wider public mission.

It should also be noted that successful implementation depends less on isolated pilot projects and more on coordinated, whole-institution approaches. Flexibility introduces complexity across time, place, content, assessment, and learner support, requiring alignment between academic units, central services, leadership, and external partners. Finally, pedagogical quality, clear learning



pathways, and credible links between micro-credentials and full qualifications are essential to ensuring that this new educational offer delivers lasting value for learners and institutions alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND POLICYMAKERS

Based on the discussion in this paper, several practical recommendations can be identified:

1. **Adopt a whole-institution strategy** for flexible learning and micro-credentials that aligns policy objectives, institutional mission, and learner needs, rather than relying on fragmented or ad hoc initiatives.

2. **Anchor micro-credentials in recognised frameworks**, such as the EQF and ECTS, to support transparency, portability, and trust across institutions and national systems.

3. **Invest in pedagogical and support capacity**, including learning design, educational technology, and learner support services, to ensure quality and inclusiveness in flexible and largely asynchronous learning environments.

4. **Design clear learning pathways and stackability routes** that enable learners to accumulate micro-credentials towards larger qualifications and to transition smoothly between flexible learning and traditional degree programmes.

5. **Strengthen collaboration with employers and communities** while safeguarding academic values, ensuring that micro-credentials address labour market needs without narrowing the educational purpose of higher education.

6. **Embed recognition of prior learning** as a



core component of personalised learning pathways, valuing learners' existing knowledge and experience and reducing unnecessary barriers to participation.

7. **Foster staff engagement and leadership**, recognising that cultural change, shared understanding, and sustained leadership commitment are critical enablers of long-term success.

Together, these recommendations point towards a vision of flexible learning and micro-credentials as integral components of a more inclusive, responsive, and socially engaged higher education system.

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EU-BALKAN INNOVATIVE MASTER CURRICULA IN INTELLIGENT TRANSPORT SYSTEMS (ITS), SUPPORTED WITH ALL-IN-ONE WEB-BASED PLATFORM-BALKANITS

prof. Ramo Šendelj, University of Donja Gorica

Efficient and sustainable road transport is essential for any country's economic and social development. However, many countries face challenges such as traffic congestion, road accidents, high costs, environmental impact, the growing demand and complexity of mobility for both people and goods. Traditional systems often struggle to weigh and address these issues together, relying heavily on infrastructure-based solutions that are costly and increasingly insufficient.

Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) offer modern solutions by integrating technology, real-time data, engineering, and automation across road infrastructure, vehicles, and users. ITS promote traffic flow, enhancing road safety, reducing emissions, and supporting the development towards smarter and greener cities. Adopting ITS is not just an option; it becomes a necessity for a sustainable future and meeting national, EU and global targets as SDGs.

BALKANITS is a multi-country project involving a consortium of two partner universities in each of Balkan countries BA-XK-ME in addition to three universities in EU CZ-RO-SE. The project aims to develop, adapt and implement innovative full/micro degree master's programs in ITS within joint efforts between partner universities according to the existing ITS master programs at EU partner universities, Bologna requirements, EU standards, best practices, and national accreditation standards.

The new/upgraded curricula will be supported by innovative elements for teaching and learning includes specialised courses for professionals, blended learning, challenge-based learning (CBL), capacity building and All-in-One web-based platform includes: web-based knowledge base, web-platform for universities-stakeholders collaboration,

analytical database, video lectures, Virtual Reality (VR), summer schools, EU-Balkan handbook of best practices, etc. The project aims to equip both students and professionals in BA-XK-ME with strong theoretical and practical ITS skills.

The overall objective of the project is to strengthen higher education capacity in the field of **Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS)** in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA), Kosovo (XK), and Montenegro (ME) by modernising study programmes, enhancing digital and pedagogical capacities, and strengthening cooperation between universities, industry, public authorities, and international partners.

This objective will be achieved through the following specific objectives:

1. **Develop and implement a new Master's Degree Programme in Intelligent Transport Systems**, delivered through blended learning modalities, accredited in line with national and European standards, and closely aligned with labour market needs to ensure high graduate employability.
2. **Introduce flexible Micro-Credential Master programmes** at partner institutions, enabling students and professionals to acquire specialised ITS competences through short, modular study paths, with clear progression routes to full Master's Degree programmes.
3. **Provide lifelong learning and professional training opportunities** through commissioned ITS modules tailored to the needs of industry, public authorities, and other stakeholders.
4. **Strengthen internationalisation through**

 **double and joint degree pathways**, fostering curriculum harmonisation, student and staff mobility, and mutual recognition among partner universities at national, regional, and EU–Balkan levels.



5. **Establish an integrated digital education ecosystem**, including a web-based learning platform, open educational resources, video lectures, traffic data repositories, virtual reality applications, and online academic dissemination tools to support teaching, learning, research, and collaboration.

6. **Build academic and institutional capacity** by training academic and administrative staff in modern pedagogical approaches, digital tools, challenge-based learning, and quality assurance practices.

 7. **Enhance research, innovation, and knowledge transfer** by integrating real-world problems, industry data, and applied research into ITS curricula and by establishing Excellence Labs at partner universities.

8. **Promote equity, diversity, and inclusion** by ensuring accessible and inclusive ITS education for students and professionals from disadvantaged backgrounds, remote areas, and individuals with special needs through blended and digital learning approaches.

9. **Align education with labour market and societal needs** through early market analysis, continuous stakeholder engagement, and curriculum adaptation to emerging ITS technologies and challenges.



10. **Increase societal awareness and policy impact of ITS** by engaging stakeholders, policymakers, and the wider public through dissemination activities, events, and evidence-based recommendations.

 11. **Ensure quality, sustainability, and long-term impact** by implementing EU-aligned quality assurance mechanisms, institutional cooperation agreements, and sustainable governance models that extend beyond the project duration.



GROUNDING ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN (GET-MED)

prof. Marija Jevrić, University of Montenegro

GET-MED (Grounded Ecological Transition for the Mediterranean) is an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education project that introduces an innovative **G**rounded + **E**cological + **T**ransition approach into pro-green urbanism and climate-sensitive territorial regeneration across the Mediterranean. Building on South-European architectural and planning pedagogies (Spain, Italy, Portugal) and strengthening cooperation with partner countries in the South Mediterranean (Egypt, Morocco) and Western Balkans (Albania, Montenegro), GET-MED responds to shared regional needs such as low effectiveness in implementing global policies, fragmented uni-sectoral planning, and delays in higher education systems adapting to societal and environmental challenges.

The project's overall objective is to address persistent structural causes behind ineffective green transition in Mediterranean cities by closing the gap between the knowledge/skills of graduates and practitioners, and real, complex urban challenges. GET-MED pursues this objective through two main, connected outputs: (1) new and updated post-graduate curricula, and (2) a cross-sectoral network of GET Labs that co-produce and exchange knowledge through research, planning and design, in collaboration with non-academic actors in urban development. In doing so, the project aims to change mindsets and capabilities so that higher education institutions, students and practitioners become agents of sustainable urban change, contributing to the EU Green Deal priorities (climate awareness, sustainability and resilience) and the broader implementation of global agendas in locally meaningful ways.

In the short term, GET-MED is expected to raise

the quality of higher education through new/updated master degrees and to operationalise GET Labs as bridges between academia and non-academic actors via hands-on case studies and real projects, while ensuring wider regional dissemination through Mediterranean networks and international urban platforms.

In the medium term, the project aims to improve employability, reduce brain drain, and create continuous, up-to-date knowledge flows through GET Labs' stakeholder-engaged work; it also enables micro-credentials/lifelong learning pathways to support green jobs and mindset change among current professionals.

Ultimately, GET-MED envisions stronger, more responsive higher education systems that prepare young professionals to lead sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban development across the Mediterranean—linking ecological priorities with local cultures, ecosystems, and socio-economic realities, and reinforcing long-term inter-Mediterranean cooperation in education, research, and practice.

PROMOTION OF INNOVATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN SYSTEMATIC PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION ENVIRONMENT (PRODIGY-E)

Prof. Dražen Božović, University Adriatic

The PRODIGY-E project is a strategic initiative aimed at strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The project is directly aligned with the call ERASMUS-EDU-2025-CBHE Strand 1, as it targets less experienced HEIs and small organizations from third countries that are not currently connected to the program and have limited capacity to participate in international projects. This supports the call's emphasis on inclusiveness and widening participation.

The consortium consists of eight partners: the coordinator of the Doboj Business and Technical College, the CEPS Kiseljak College, University of Mostar and the IT company BITConEx from Bosnia and Herzegovina; University Adriatic Bar (Faculty of Business Economics and Law) from Montenegro; and three experienced institutions – The University of Bari Aldo Moro from Italy, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid from Spain and State University of Novi Pazar from Serbia, which bring expertise in the fields of innovation, IT and institutional development.

The main goal of the project is to improve the ability to access financial resources, develop projects and establish partnerships with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and local communities.

Key activities include the establishment of Project Management Offices (PMOs) and Student Innovation Hubs (SIHs) within partner institutions. These units will serve as centers for the development of project ideas, project management in accordance with European Commission rules and encouragement of student innovation. Special emphasis is placed on digital transformation, including training for the use of advanced digital tools, agile methodologies, as well as the application of Web 3 and AI technologies

in project management and innovation.

Target groups:

- Consortium member institutions: Gain long-term strategic advantages through better project management support.
- Students: Primary users of SIH, they receive specialized training and better access to international exchanges and internships.
- Academic and administrative staff: Improve project management skills and digital competences.
- Local communities and SMEs: Experience economic growth through stronger partnerships with HEIs.

The project will generate short-term, medium-term and long-term effects for defined target groups.

- Short-term effects:
 - o Establishment of new institutional offices (PMO and SIH).
 - o Increased participation in Erasmus+ and other EU initiatives.
 - o Improved student and staff skills in project management, entrepreneurship and digital tools.
- Medium-term effects:
 - o Strengthened partnerships with local economic and social communities.
 - o Harmonization of academic curricula with the needs of the labor market.

o Creating new opportunities for internships and joint research projects.

- Long-term effects:

o Sustainable cooperation between HEIs, local communities and SMEs that encourages regional economic development.

o PMO and SIH become permanent platforms for knowledge exchange, innovation and international cooperation.

o HEIs are becoming key drivers of regional growth.

The implementation of the PRODIGY-E project is planned for 36 months and is structured through seven thematically organized work packages. The total budget of the project amounts to 429,914 EUR of which the requested EU grant amounts to 386.923 EUR, while co-financing by the consortium is 42.991 EUR (10%).

REVOLUTIONIZING EDUCATION AND LEARNING THROUGH INTELLIGENT AI-BASED LEARNING ENHANCEMENT

Prof. Marija Janković, University Mediterranean

The project Revolutionizing Education and Learning through Intelligent AI-Based Learning Enhancement is implemented within the framework of the ERASMUS-EDU-2025-CBHE-STRAND-1 programme and focuses on the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve the quality, efficiency, and accessibility of higher education.

 Rapid technological development, particularly in the field of Artificial Intelligence, is bringing profound changes to the way knowledge is delivered and acquired. This project responds to the growing need for modernization of educational systems through the introduction of intelligent, adaptive, and personalized learning solutions.

General Objective:

General objective is to foster the digital transformation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Western Balkans through the responsible and inclusive use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) — enhancing learning experiences, improving educational governance, and aligning education with labor market needs. 

Specific objectives:

1. Personalized Learning

 a) Develop and implement AI-driven adaptive learning systems that tailor educational content to individual student needs, pace, and learning styles.

b) Introduce AI-powered virtual assistants and chatbots to support students, particularly those in remote or underserved areas.

c) Pilot AI-based assessment and feedback tools to increase student engagement and academic performance.

2. Administrative Efficiency

a) Integrate AI automation tools for grading, attendance tracking, and academic planning to reduce administrative workload.

b) Establish a data-driven decision-making framework for HEIs, providing real-time analytics on student performance, dropout rates, and institutional outcomes.

c) Create and implement AI ethics guidelines and teacher training modules to ensure transparent, fair, and responsible AI use.

3. Institutional Capacity Building

a) Assess the digital readiness and AI adoption barriers of HEIs through surveys, workshops, and benchmarking with EU institutions.

b) Strengthen institutional governance and digital infrastructure to support sustainable AI integration.

c) Develop professional development programs to enhance digital and pedagogical competencies among academic and administrative staff.

4. Sustainability, Scalability & Policy Alignment

a) Align AI-based educational strategies with 

national and EU higher education policies through collaboration with governments and accreditation bodies.

b) Institutionalize AI-powered education through continuous teacher training and policy support.

c) Develop an open-source framework to enable other regional HEIs to replicate and adapt successful AI models, ensuring long-term sustainability and scalability.

Planned Activities:

The project foresees the following activities:

- collecting and analyzing data on learning patterns, educational content, and student feedback;
- developing and training AI models to personalize content delivery and monitor student progress;
- integrating AI tools into controlled educational environments;
- evaluating the impact of AI solutions on the quality of learning and teaching processes;
- facilitating knowledge exchange and cooperation among partner institutions.

Expected Outcomes:

The implementation of the project is expected to deliver the following outcomes:

- personalized learning experiences tailored to individual student needs;
- a significant reduction in the administrative workload of educators;
- increased student engagement and improved academic performance;

• enhanced interactivity and overall quality of the educational process;

• the creation of a more modern, efficient, and accessible higher education system based on intelligent technologies.

Project Partners

- International University of Travnik (Coordinator) – Bosnia and Herzegovina
- University Mediterranean Podgorica – Montenegro
- University Adriatic Bar – Montenegro
- Polytechnic Institute of Porto – Portugal
- Fachhochschule des Mittelstandes – University of Applied Sciences Bielefeld – Germany
- Banja Luka College – Bosnia and Herzegovina
- University of Vigo – Spain

The RELIABLE project is expected to generate a significant and sustainable impact at the institutional, academic, and societal levels, contributing to the long-term improvement of higher education quality, research capacity, and evidence-based decision-making in partner institutions.

Planned Impact of the RELIABLE Project

1. Impact on Higher Education Institutions

- Strengthened institutional capacity to design, manage, and evaluate reliable, resilient, and data-informed systems and processes.
- Improved integration of research outcomes into teaching, governance, and strategic planning within partner institutions.
- Enhanced ability of HEIs to respond to



contemporary challenges through evidence-based, resilient, and sustainable approaches.

- Increased institutional readiness for participation in future international research and development projects.

2. Impact on Academic Staff and Researchers

- Improved research competencies in areas related to reliability, resilience, sustainability, and systemic analysis.

- Increased interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers from economics, management, and related fields.

- 
- Enhanced capacity to apply innovative methodologies and analytical tools in teaching and research.

- Greater international visibility and networking opportunities for academic staff involved in the project.

3. Impact on Students and Young Researchers

- Improved learning outcomes through exposure to research-based teaching and real-world case studies.

- Strengthened analytical, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills relevant to contemporary labor market needs. 

- Increased participation of students and early-stage researchers in research and innovation activities.

- 
- Better alignment of educational content with practical and societal challenges.

4. Societal and Policy Impact

- Contribution to the development of more

reliable and resilient organizational and economic systems through research-based recommendations.

- Support for evidence-based policymaking by providing analytical frameworks and research outputs relevant to public and private stakeholders.

- Strengthened cooperation between academia, industry, and public institutions.

- Increased awareness of the importance of reliability, sustainability, and resilience in socio-economic development.

5. Long-Term and Sustainable Impact

- Sustainable integration of project results into institutional strategies, curricula, and research agendas.

- Creation of a foundation for scaling and replication of project outcomes across other institutions and regions.

- Long-term strengthening of regional and international academic cooperation networks.

EMPOWERING EDUCATION: RE-BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE WB REGION (RBWB)

Ivana Vulić, Faculty for Montenegrin language and literature

Partners: University of Sarajevo, University of Tuzla, University of Novi Pazar, University of Zadar.

Duration: 36 months

This project aims to strengthen the Faculty for Montenegrin Language and Literature (FCJK), a newcomer HEI from the Western Balkans (Region 1), by aligning it with European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs). With Sustainable Growth and Jobs as its overarching priority, it enhances education quality, addresses skills gaps, and promotes inclusive participation. Through partnerships with European and regional HEIs, the initiative will develop quality assurance mechanisms, expand academic networking, and foster professional pathways. Key actions include establishing an International Relations Office (IRO), launching an interdisciplinary program in cultural studies, integrating work-based learning, and leveraging digital resources to enhance teaching, research, and virtual collaboration.

Training programs, conferences, and expert partnerships will advance research on Balkan culture within the EU context, promoting international cooperation. By supporting FCJK's modernization, the project aligns with national policies and the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE).

As Montenegro's second public HEI, FCJK advances Montenegrin linguistic, literary, and cultural studies. Its recent EUA Associate Membership marks a key step in internationalization. This project strengthens FCJK's institutional capacity, integrates it into the European Higher Education Area, and promotes EU values in teaching and research.

The primary goal of this project is to drive the development, modernization, and internationalization of Montenegro's Higher Education Institution system by leveraging the expertise of high-level experts both domestically and internationally. With partners from diverse countries and academic fields, the project ensures multidisciplinary and intercultural outcomes, expanding the scientific community network and creating regional and transnational impact. Building on the successful practices of consortium member HEIs and their previous Erasmus+ collaboration, this project aims to transfer knowledge and strengthen capacities in Montenegro. Focus areas include curriculum development, enhancing international relations, and improving education quality at newcomer HEIs in third countries not associated with the Programme. Additionally, the project will establish Montenegro's first interdisciplinary program in cultural studies and explore joint programs with partner HEIs. This initiative contributes to the broader goal of enhancing Montenegrin HEIs' capacity to offer cultural studies education and research. Specific objectives include providing targeted capacity development measures for HEIs, designing integrated master's programs, equipping FCJK with modern digital resources, offering research mobility programs for students, coordinating academic programs among regional HEIs, conducting training for students and professors, and enhancing the skills of staff at FCJK and partner HEIs.

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