
Scottish Tertiary Education Network for Micro-Credentials Minutes

The second meeting of the Scottish Tertiary Education Network for Micro-Credentials was held on 16 April 2024, via Teams

Present:

Jon Buglass (Co-Chair)	Luke Millard
Scott Connor	Jools O'Connor
Ann Cotterill (sub. Steve Osborne)	Joy Perkins
Douglas Dixon	Sara Rae
Sheila Dunn	Morven Shearer
	Sally Smith
John Kerr	Anne Tierney (Co-chair)
Alen MacKinlay	Debra Willison
Kristofer McKeown	

Officers:

Karen Gray
Phoebe Mayer
Alison Malcolm
Phil McGuinness
Erica Russell-Hensens

Apologies:

Pauline Hanesworth	Anne Black
Alison Gilmour	Sarah-Jane Linton
Siobhan Wilson	
Angela Pignatelli	

1. Welcome and Introductions

A member asked if SFC could update the network on the indicative funding announcement and the anticipated impact to Upskilling Funding for Universities. It was confirmed that SFC was not able to update members ahead of the publication of indicative allocations which were anticipated to be released later in the week. Members were reminded that allocations would be available via the SFC website.

The co-chairs introduced themselves to the network and welcomed members to the meeting. Ann Cotterill was welcomed to the meeting in place of Steve Osborne, who was unable to attend to represent the Welsh MC Network, and it was noted that Jools O'Connor would be joining later.

2. Minute of previous meeting (MCN/Min1/23)

The Minutes of the last meeting were approved, with no comments arising.

3. Reflection on last meeting outputs (MCN/01/24)

The Chair reflected on key actions noted at the last meeting:

- **Appointment of joint chairs**
- **Teams site:** Phoebe updated members that issues relating to the interface between SFC and institutions' IT security systems had prevented some from accessing the site. It was noted that invitation links (and instructions) would be sent out this week.
- **Workstream development and membership.** Network members have confirmed preferences and have been allocated to workstreams accordingly. There was little preference for the Communications Workstream (WS4); a proposed amendment has been made within the paper relating to item 5 of the agenda.
- **Learning from others:** Members were updated on the regional perspectives and approaches to MCs that the Network has and will continue to observe, including:
 - **Ireland** – as per item 4
 - **Wales:** Co-chairs / Chair from the respective networks (Wales and Scotland) will be attending each other's MC Network meetings to share learning. The Co-Chairs provided an update on the first Welsh network meeting, noting the similarity in size and scale between Wales and Scotland's sectors, and the emphasis on collaboration. It was noted that less focus has been placed so far on stackability, which might reflect the differing contexts and FE frameworks within

each nation. Members heard that a proof of concept has been developed within Wales that embeds, for the first time, MCs into a degree in Sports Science. The Chair (JB) noted that he has been invited to present on the Scottish Network's activity and progress. It was raised that a public facing webpage to promote the network's activity would be helpful in these instances. It was pointed out that item 5 of the agenda would be covering the subject of communications, which it was agreed was timely subject to move on.

- **The Netherlands:** It was noted that the Scottish Government has been invited to engage with the Dutch government on the creation of an MC framework, and that the Network will be updated on this when further information is received.
- **Australia:** MCN/01/2024. Members noted the similarity between Scotland and Australia's respective centering of skills gaps as a principal driver for MC delivery. Members commented on the references to upskilling, reskilling and /meta skills, which feel relevant to the Scottish context, and that the recommendations arising in the AUA report may have relevance to SG in its consideration of the Withers Review.

Members agreed that Scotland could learn from the Australian [SkillsCred Seeker website](#), but that supporting context / guidance may be needed to help users navigate the complexity of MC space. It was also noted that the framework development and platform was enabled by significant investment by the Australian government.

Alison Malcolm (SFC) offered to provide a paper summarizing engagement with the Australian Government officials regarding how MCs provision and delivery is planned centrally to meet national and regional needs, and how the funding model is differentiated accordingly.

4. **Lessons learned from Ireland**

The co-chair handed over to Jools who introduced herself and shared a presentation about the development of a Micro-credential ecosystem in Ireland, on behalf of the Irish Universities Association (IUA). The slides will be available on the Teams site and attached separately.

IUA represents Ireland's research intensive, enterprise engaged public universities, but not (currently) the Technological Universities which were established more recently. The MC framework development was funded through the Higher Education Authority (€12.3m) to empower lifelong learning,) and 90% of the budget was spent on staffing resource.

Four main strands of activity were involved in getting to current position:

- Establishing a National Framework;
- Fostering collaboration between universities and enterprise (MicroCreds Innovate);
- Creating a National Platform (MicroCreds.ie), which provides course, institution and fee subsidy information for learners and employers;
- Delivering a suite of Micro-credentials (MCs) that are focused on workplace upskilling and re-skilling.

Please see slide 4 for further information on the range of MCs delivered.

Governance involves project leads from each university, who are supported by an institutional project team and a national coordination team. Enterprise Advisory and Steering Groups ensure stakeholder input and decision-making. Please see slides 7-10 for further information.

Funding comes from the Higher Education Authority, supported by the National Training Fund, however enterprise funded cohorts are considered by universities to be the most significant and sustainable funding model going forward.

Benefits of collaboration

- Consistency: the framework fosters consistency across institutions, ensuring a standardised approach to Micro-credentials
- Stakeholder engagement: The platform informs stakeholders about Micro-credentials, promoting awareness and understanding.
- Funding opportunities: Collaboration with sectors enables access to funding for free subsidies, enhancing affordability and uptake.

Challenges

- Resource Allocation: Initial funding focused on staffing rather than necessary system changes required to implement lifelong learning.
- System adaptation: Manual workarounds are insufficient for scaling Micro-credential provision, making retrofitting changes challenging.
- Governance agility: Ensuring flexibility and consensus in governance processes poses challenges, impacting decision-making efficiency.
- Resource Procurement: Securing necessary resources for central change projects, such as IT and communications support, can be challenging.
- Expectation Management: Coordinating and managing expectations across stakeholder groups requires clear project scope and flexibility to adapt to changing environment.

Questions

What appetite would there be from learners and employers for MCs if these weren't funded?

Subsidized lifelong learning is a competitive space in Ireland, however Enterprise funded cohorts are significant for enrollment, and the funding model of MCs more broadly. This depends on the strength of relationship between universities and business but can generate funding of up to €1,500 per learner per year. This represents the long-term funding model that most aspire to continue.

How was it decided which MCs would be stackable? Did this decision involve employers?

All decisions have been made by universities, but most of these would have been working in collaboration with enterprise or industry partners. Those that are stackable tend to be within specific subject areas, e.g., clinical, pharma, aviation. IUA is working on creating an overarching framework for universities to use if/when decided to create stackable MCs that can apply across the sector. All MCs are designed with industry partners, or with industry in mind and this can create challenge regarding balancing expectations. Industry partners often want to co-develop something they can deliver externally / commercially too.

Is there appetite or interest for stacking in Ireland? What is the evidence base for this?

The biggest volume of enquiries received from learners is about if/how MC can be stacked. Whether this translates when stackability is embedded across the framework tbc. There is work to develop the system's capacity to embed stackability but it is anticipated that stacking within niche areas will be popular.

What is the most popular mode requested from employers?

Online and hybrid, very few in-person (less than 10) unless involving lab work.

Has there or will there be an evaluation of the project at a national level?

Yes, analysis has been carried out on metrics for learner numbers, numbers of MCs and income. A centralized learner survey will follow to look at learner satisfaction and longitudinal impact to evidence future funding requests to Government.

5. Workstreams workshop and Plenary (MCN/02/24)

Karen Gray introduced this item and chaired the workshop activity.

Allocations to workstreams have been based on members stated first and second preferences. There was little preference for the communications workstream, and a revised consideration of approach has been proposed in the paper.

Members agreed to the proposal that each work stream (1-3) consider how the outputs thereof can be communicated both within and outwith the network to encourage engagement with key stakeholders, and to share findings and recommendations with the sector – potentially via a webpage.

It was noted that this approach will require coordination to collate and progress outputs from each workstream and it was agreed to add communications as a rolling agenda item for future MC network meeting. It was raised by the Chair (AT) that it was timely to reflect and make public the body of work that has been completed and is ongoing in this area. It was noted that this might be a good opportunity to also help set expectations from employers in regard to resourcing and funding MCs.

Members were split into three break-out rooms to discuss the considerations associated with each workstream, as presented in the paper and Padlet. Members were asked to nominate a Lead for each workstream, and to identify next steps. It was noted that the Student workstream group would be smaller due to the number of apologies.

Members can review the comments collated via Padlet boards here: <https://padlet.com/karenggray01446/micro-credentials-network-workstreams-xbku4j9t3kdr51p2>

- **Student workstream:** Members acknowledged the need to review funding policies for Micro-credentials, discussing options like part-time and employer-funded models. They also highlighted the importance of understanding current and future student demographics, focusing on access and barriers to entry. Recognizing the significance of regional differences, they considered the potential for more localized collaboration across institutions, employers, and Local Authorities to tailor Micro-credential provision accordingly.
- Regarding stakeholder engagement, it was agreed that further work was needed to understand the student profile including the recruitment strategies.
- Reflecting on the level and specificity of Micro-credentials offered, the group discussed the Irish model's high-level approach and the potential benefits of diversification to better address skills gaps and suit the demographic profiles of students in Scotland.

- Lastly, the participants agreed on the necessity of further discussion to ensure the inclusion of absent members' views. They also planned to nominate a workstream Lead and outline next steps for advancing the Micro-credential initiative.
- **Employer workstream:** The group discussed regionalisation, drawing parallels between the Australian funding model and its potential relevance to Scotland, e.g. the potential of targeted funding based specific curriculum and skill areas rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Concerns were raised about the potential cluttering of the website or hub without a regional perspective on skills needs and Micro-credential availability.
- Members discussed delivery mode, with consideration given to how online delivery might impact the relevance of regional delivery. The group highlighted the importance and challenges of being responsive to the diversity of employer networks within tertiary education, including NGOs. There was consensus on the need for further understanding of employer stakeholder perspectives and involvement in co-creating Micro-credentials.
- Members suggested that the 12-week turnaround referenced in relation to Ireland might be overly ambitious. They discussed the potential utility of a website or hub for engaging employers, emphasizing the importance of using transferrable terminology and development models. The Pathways.ac.uk website was cited as a potential model for consideration.
- The group highlighted the importance of employer consultation and input regarding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), credit rating, and stackability of Micro-credentials. Concerns were raised about the divergence between the funding and subsidies available in Ireland and Australia compared to the Scottish context, potentially impacting achievable outcomes.
- Next steps and designated Leads were not identified.
- **Institutions Workstream:** Members in this group highlighted the need for further upskilling on Micro-credentials (MCs) to secure institutional buy-in and resources for development.
- They acknowledged that institutions possess the necessary infrastructure to support MC delivery, including familiarity with the SCQF framework, credit rating characteristics, and database usage. The group suggested that the upcoming website refresh by SCQF could be an opportunity to redefine MC activities.
- While stackability and portability require significant work, the group emphasized that these challenges should not hinder progress. While Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was not extensively discussed, the level of support for MC learners was addressed, including ensuring

equal access to library and services for part-time students. A tiered model of access and support was proposed as a potential solution.

- The group also recognized the need to consider Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) and developments in England alongside those in Ireland and Australia.
- Next steps and designated Leads were not identified.

It was noted in summation that the network will need to pick up and agree the nomination of workstream leads and next steps to account for the number of apologies.

6. Next steps / close

The Chair (AT) thanked members for taking the time to attend the meeting.

In summation of the discussions, it was noted that it was positive to see members new and continuing return to progress the work on MCs, and that, the network is in a good position to make progress.

It was noted that the next MCN meeting will be in person on 3rd June.