

AONTAS' Response to QQI's Green Paper on Micro-credentials

AONTAS - the National Adult Learning
Organisation

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About AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969. Backed by our robust research and focused community engagement, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We do this work on behalf of our members and adult learners who inform our research and campaigns for social change across the whole island of Ireland.

Summary

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to respond to questions posed in [QQI's Green Paper on Micro-credentials](#). Micro-credentials have the potential to transform Ireland's lifelong learning landscape by widening access, promoting equity, and recognising diverse forms of learning. However, this potential will only be realised if social justice, inclusion, and learner diversity are placed at the heart of policy and quality assurance frameworks.

This submission answers four questions posed in the Green Paper on Micro-credentials (QQI, 2025:15). Our response to these questions is summarised below.

1. What are the drivers for micro-credentials?

- a. **Social Justice in a Context of Rapid Social Change**
- b. **Social Inclusion**
- c. **Need for Recognition of Transversal Skills and Holistic Learner Development**

Ensure that learners furthest away from the education system are supported to engage in accredited micro-credentials and short form learning in a context of rapid social, economic, and demographic change.

2. What are the enablers for micro-credentials?

- a. **Micro-credentials in Community Education as a Gateway to Access and Progression.**
- b. **Recognition of Diverse Forms of Validation**

c. Communities of Practice

Stronger recognition of informal and non-formal learning in community contexts to enable participation in micro-credentials and short form learning.

3. What are the risks for micro-credentials?

a. Unequal Outcomes

b. Validation Processes

Existing inequalities in participation in education will continue to be evident in this learning format without equity-focused actions to support the expansion of micro-credential pathways.

4. What are the opportunities for micro-credentials?

a. Greater Inclusion and Equity of Outcomes

b. Transversal Skills for Holistic Learner Development

Leveraging of community education's strengths as a powerful opportunity to advance equality, inclusion, and workforce readiness.

AONTAS Submission in Detail

1. What are the top three drivers for micro-credentials?

This section will outline the need to ensure that learners furthest away from the education system are supported to engage in accredited micro-credentials and short form learning in a context of rapid social, economic, and demographic change. Accreditation of awards should consider the value of adult learning, not just as a driver of economic participation, but as a social good in itself. This can only be achieved through the holistic development and social inclusion of all learners.

Driver 1: Social Justice in a Context of Rapid Social Change

Micro-credentials must be developed and implemented with a clear commitment to social justice and inclusion. In a time of rapid social change, micro-credentials must ensure that learners facing the greatest barriers have equitable access to quality, accredited learning

opportunities (QQI, 2025:15; SOLAS, 2025). The OECD Skills assessment of Ireland has highlighted the extent of these emerging challenges, noting that a high proportion of Irish workers face a risk of automation for their roles (16% vs an OECD average of 14%) and skills-displacing technological change (21%) (OECD, 2023:16-7). This report highlights the need to ensure access to life-long and life-wide education in both formal and nonformal contexts to support adaptability to an everchanging context of work and living is just and equitable (OECD, 2023:21; SOLAS, 2025).

While micro-credentials can support workforce adaptability, they must also serve a broader purpose: education as a public good. In an era of threats to democracy, widening disinformation and greater climate instability, this form of education offers a solution to the pressing social issues of our time (Goggin et al., 2019, Social Justice Ireland, 2023). There are already examples of programmes that promote social benefits, including those that promote democratic engagement, a just transition, and media literacy skills (Sioneriu, 2024, SOLIDAR, 2024; Meyler, 2025; Goggin et al., 2019).

The EU Competencies Framework (2022) also notes the wide range of benefits that learning provides beyond employability, including the learner's personal development and fulfilment, active citizenship and social inclusion. For this reason, micro-credentials could be harnessed to promote engagement with adult education as a public good (Pouliou, 2024: 12). For these reasons, micro-credentials should validate learning that promotes personal development, media literacy, democratic engagement, and climate awareness, alongside technical skills (Pouliou, 2024; Council of Europe, 2012).

Driver 2: Social Inclusion

Current micro-credential provision in Ireland disproportionately serves highly qualified learners, risking reinforcement of the “Matthew Effect”- whereby those with existing high level of formal qualification are most likely to engage in lifelong learning (SOLAS, 2025; Meyler et al., 2023). To counter this, QQI should ensure that quality assurance processes actively support inclusion, enabling access to micro-credentials across diverse learning contexts and levels (QQI, 2025:5; Hawley-Woodall, 2024:11).

This requires consideration of practice in a range of learning contexts where learners most distant from education can be engaged, including minor awards and nonformal learning

opportunities in community education (Cobain & Jackson, 2025; Hawley-Woodall, 2024: 11, QQI, 2025: 5). Accessible learning options delivered in communities has immense value for employability, mobility and inclusion, however this depends on the recognition of this learning in inclusive validation processes (Council of Europe, 2012:31; Hawley-Woodall, 2024: 11, QQI, 2025: 5).

Driver 3: Need for Recognition of Transversal Skills and Holistic Learner Development

Micro-credentials should support the holistic development of learners, by helping them acquire transversal skills that promote both personal and interpersonal competencies and aptitudes (Cleary, 2023:1–3; Goggin et al., 2019). These competencies are critical for employment and civic participation yet often decline after early education (Cleary, 2023). Embedding transversal skills into micro-credential frameworks will ensure learners from all backgrounds can thrive in work and society (TransvalEU, 2021a; TransvalEU, 2021b:131).

Targeted development of micro-credentials that support this holistic development of learners can capitalise on the strengths of community education to ensure inclusive access to this vital learning in non-formal contexts. This will ensure that those learners who are the furthest from formal education can benefit from their attainment through validated awards (Cleary, 2023).

2. What are the top three enablers for micro-credentials?

This section will outline the need to give stronger recognition of informal and non-formal learning in community contexts to enable participation in micro-credentials and short form learning. This will empower adult learners to fully benefit from the value offered through micro-credentials and embark on clear progression routes to further learning opportunities. Collaboration across FET providers, community organisations, and national bodies will support the development and implementation of inclusive quality assurance practices and learner-centred approaches through Communities of Practice.

Enabler 1: Micro-credentials in Community Education as a Gateway to Access and Progression Opportunities

Community education offers short, flexible courses that build confidence, promote employability, and encourage progression (Cobain & Jackson, 2025; SOLAS, 2024). These

accessible options are essential for learners facing multiple barriers to education. However, most micro-credentials currently cluster at NFQ Levels 6–8, limiting opportunities for those seeking foundational pathways (Hawley-Woodall, 2024).

QQI should support the expanded provision of accredited short-form learning at NFQ Levels 1–5, enabling learners to accumulate credits toward full awards in part-time, flexible formats (ETBI, 2015:15; Council of Europe, 2012). This approach will address a key barrier to access and progression throughout the tertiary sector and ensure micro-credentials serve as a genuine gateway to lifelong learning.

Enabler 2: Recognition of Diverse Forms of Validation

Quality assurance processes for micro-credentials must reflect the realities of community education and adult literacy settings. Digital badges, portfolios, skills demonstrations, and mentoring are already used to recognise learning outcomes (Hawley-Woodall, 2024:20–21). A continued focus on capturing experiential learning through reflective assessment, portfolios, and observation tools to capture and transversal skills should form a key part of the development of micro-credentials (Cleary, 2023). These tools must be complemented with validation processes that recognise the fact that both non-formal and formal education in community settings requires proportional, flexible, and context-appropriate quality assurance mechanisms (Hawley-Woodall, 2024). This will enhance legitimacy of learning in non-traditional contexts while widening accessibility for diverse groups of learners (Council of Europe, 2012).

Enabler 3: Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoPs) offer an effective mechanism for developing, implementing, and assuring quality in micro-credentials (QQI, 2020:17; Council of Europe, 2012). The AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) exemplifies how sector-wide practitioner collaboration can strengthen inclusive quality assurance processes.

Greater recognition of the potential of CoPs at a systems level is needed (QQI, 2020:82). They can address persistent challenges, including challenges around Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), the development of context and subject specific quality assurance processes, while sharing practice, developing tools, and promoting quality (Hawley-Woodall, 2024:38–

39). This has potential benefits for diverse groups of learners in different community settings, by opening routes to further opportunities through the development of micro-credentials in collaboration with key stakeholders.

3. What are the top two risks for micro-credentials?

This section will outline how existing inequalities in participation in education will continue to be evident in this learning format without equity-focused actions. Addressing this issue could include supporting the expansion of micro-credentials in community contexts through a review of validation processes.

Risk 1: Unequal Outcomes

Participation in lifelong learning remains strongly stratified by age, educational attainment, and employment status (OECD, 2023:21; Meyler et al., 2023). In 2025, SOLAS reported that over two-thirds of lifelong learners were in full-time employment, and 73% held NFQ Level 6–10 qualifications (SOLAS, 2025). Without targeted measures, micro-credentials will replicate these patterns, leaving behind learners with lower qualifications or limited resources.

Accreditation motivates learner participation, but current frameworks favour higher-level provision. QQI should prioritise recognition of learning at lower NFQ levels and embed inclusive validation methods and options to ensure equitable access to recognised awards both within, and without the NQF (QQI, 2025:13, 27-28; QQI, 2020: 14; Council of Europe, 2012: 31). This requires a critical review of quality assurance processes at lower levels of provision in non-formal contexts to ensure that learners who are farthest from the education system can access education that will open opportunities for progression in community contexts.

Risk 2: Validation Processes

Long and administratively burdensome validation processes risk excluding smaller community providers, many of whom operate with limited funding, part-time staff, and high local demand. AONTAS has engaged with a network of community education providers to explore their experience of validation processes and support the development of the sector's capacity to engage with this vital indicator of quality education. Key risks identified

by this network include a lack of consistent guidance and support for engagement with quality assurance processes. As with other processes, including Recognition of Prior Learning, challenges relating to the “transferability” or “stackability” of these awards might be amplified without support for engagement in quality and validation processes around micro-credentials (Cedefop, 2023:14; Hawley-Woodall, 2024:23–24, QQI, 2025:10-12; Oliver, 2022).

For this reason, QQI should develop standard templates, shared assessment toolkits, and collaborative quality assurance supports through ETBs and community networks. Light-touch verification options for non-formal options at lower levels of accreditation should also be considered (QQI, 2025: 13; McCoshen, 2023; Pouliou, 2024).

4. What are the top two opportunities for micro-credentials?

This section promotes the leveraging of community education’s strengths as a powerful opportunity to advance equality, inclusion, and workforce readiness. A responsive and flexible approach to micro credentials can expand learner participation and widen access to micro credentials, while supporting social inclusion.

Opportunity 1: Greater Inclusion and Equity of Outcomes

Contextually responsive validation systems can make education more flexible and accessible for learners with low qualifications, migrants, older adults, people with disabilities, and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Pouliou, 2024:24; Cobain & Jackson, 2025). Integrating universal design principles into micro-credential development will ensure equality of outcomes and motivate participation (Cedefop, 2023:13–16).

Opportunity 2: Transversal Skills for Holistic Learner Development

Transversal skills, including critical thinking, communication, resilience, digital literacy, and intercultural understanding are essential for work and civic life but remain undervalued (Goggin et al., 2019:3; TransvalEU, 2021a). Community education is uniquely positioned to foster these competencies through short, flexible programmes. The realisation of this value for learners relies on clearly outlined learner outcome frameworks that can empower learners to understand their capabilities and plan for further education or employment (Goggin et al., 2019). This would also support community education providers to capitalise

on a key strength of the sector: learner inclusion and progression, linking outcomes to clear standards in policy (Cobain & Jackson, 2025). QQI should develop clear learner outcome frameworks for transversal skills, similar to the QQI Literacy Framework, to strengthen Recognition of Prior Learning and system-wide coherence (TransvalEU, 2021b:131).

Conclusion

Micro-credentials can be a powerful lever for inclusion, equity, and lifelong learning. In expanding access to micro-credentials QQI can further reduce structural barriers that affect access and progression for learners most distant from education. QQI's future policy should explicitly value non-formal learning, reduce administrative barriers for providers, and embed inclusive validation methods. By embracing community education and transversal skills, Ireland can build a micro-credential system that empowers every learner, regardless of background, to participate, progress, and thrive.

AONTAS urges QQI to adopt an approach that positions micro-credentials as part of a wider ecosystem of lifelong learning, one that recognises the public good of education, supports social inclusion, and reflects the diverse realities of learners' lives and learning contexts. By embracing community education as a core enabler, Ireland can build a micro-credential system that enhances progression, fosters equity, and strengthens social inclusion.

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