MESHE TRANSVERSAL ANALYSIS

Learner motivations, challenges and enabling conditions for participation in microcredentials

MESHE | Microcredentials exchange system for Higher Education in Europe

Project Deliverable 2.2

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MESHE Transversal Analysis

Learner motivations, challenges and enabling conditions for participation in microcredentials

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a transversal analysis of learner motivations, challenges and enabling conditions for participation in microcredentials, undertaken as part of the Erasmus+ MESHE *Microcredentials Exchange System for Higher Education in Europe* project (see Annex 1). Its purpose is to strengthen understanding of the learner perspective and provide an evidence-informed foundation for the development of the MESHE Advocacy and Motivation Pack. The analysis also contributes to wider discussions on how universities can design and communicate microcredential opportunities that are relevant, accessible and meaningful to diverse learners.

The report integrates evidence from focus discussion groups conducted across seven European countries and discussions facilitated through the European Students' Union (representing 87 participants), stakeholder consultations with employers and civil society organisations (representing 26 participants) and a questionnaire completed by 45 learners with experience of microcredentials. These findings were further examined at the MESHE Peer Learning Seminar in Brussels in September 2026 and contextualised through relevant academic research and European policy literature. The analysis is exploratory and qualitative led; its findings illuminate recurring patterns and differences across learner contexts rather than providing nationally representative conclusions.

The analysis of the learners questionnaire (reinforced by all the other feedback collected) identifies several interconnected findings:

- **Learners are motivated by diverse purposes.** Professional development was the most frequently selected motivation in the questionnaire (36 of 45 respondents; 80%), while personal interest or curiosity was also significant (19 respondents; 42%). Microcredential value should therefore not be understood exclusively through employability or career advancement.
- **Practical relevance is central to perceived value.** Relevance of course content was valued by 31 of 45 respondents (69%), while 24 (53%) highlighted practical skills gained. Learners need to understand how an opportunity connects with their personal or professional goals and what they can expect to gain from participation.
- **Time and workload are significant barriers.** Time constraints were reported by 26 of 45 respondents (58%), and 23 (51%) indicated that their course required more time or effort than anticipated. Transparent information about workload, assessment and attendance requirements is therefore essential to informed participation.
- **Flexibility must be understood in context.** Flexible scheduling was identified by 27 respondents (60%) as an influence on future participation. However, the qualitative evidence demonstrates that learners differ in their preferences for online, in-person and blended learning. Predictability, appropriate support and opportunities for interaction can be as important as flexibility itself.
- **Recognition and progression influence value but cannot be assumed.** Employer recognition was identified by 18 respondents (40%) as a factor influencing future participation, while 17 (38%) selected the possibility of building towards a larger qualification. Learners need clear distinctions between the value of learning itself, recognition by employers and confirmed academic progression opportunities.
- **Access depends on more than the availability of provision.** Affordability, academic confidence, digital participation and institutional practices can interact with work and caring responsibilities. Shorter or online provision does not automatically ensure inclusion, particularly for learners unfamiliar with higher education.

Drawing these findings together, the report proposes a *participation-alignment lens* through which microcredential opportunities can be examined. This considers three interconnected conditions: relevance to a purpose the learner values, feasibility of participation within their circumstances, and the credibility or usability of the resulting learning or award. A provisional seven-stage learner pathway, encompassing awareness, relevance, value, feasibility, access, experience and realisation, offers a complementary approach for identifying learner-facing questions and institutional responsibilities. Both are proposed as practical analytical tools requiring further testing rather than validated models of learner behaviour.

Discussions at the consortium's Peer Learning Seminar in Brussels were broadly consistent with the emerging findings, while highlighting differences between learner populations and institutional contexts. It also helped translate the analysis into priorities for the Advocacy and Motivation Pack, including accessible explanations of microcredentials, transparent programme information, practical guidance on workload and recognition, learner readiness resources and authentic accounts of different learning journeys.

A central conclusion of this analysis is that learner-facing advocacy can improve awareness, understanding and informed decision-making, but cannot independently resolve structural barriers. Affordable access, appropriate programme design, credible recognition arrangements and meaningful progression opportunities require coordinated action by education providers, employers, recognition bodies and policymakers. Overall, the report concludes that the potential of microcredentials to widen participation in university lifelong learning depends not simply on offering smaller units of learning, but on ensuring that relevant opportunities are genuinely feasible for learners and that their outcomes can be meaningfully understood and used.

1. INTRODUCTION

Across Europe, microcredentials have become an important element of discussion about how education and training systems can respond to changing skills needs while offering more flexible opportunities for learning throughout life. The Council of the European Union Recommendation (2022) describes a microcredential as a record of assessed learning outcomes acquired through a small volume of learning, underpinned by quality assurance and capable of being shared and, where appropriate, combined with other credentials. The Recommendation situates microcredentials within a wider lifelong learning agenda embracing personal, social, cultural and labour market needs, rather than treating them solely as instruments of employment policy (Council of the European Union, 2022). This policy promise is, however, somewhat conditional. Smaller units of learning may offer more targeted entry points, but their value depends on whether prospective learners can understand the offering, judge the required commitment, access appropriate support and have confidence in recognition. European policy accordingly emphasises transparency, quality, accessibility, recognition and portability as key elements of a functioning microcredential ecosystem (Council of the European Union, 2022). Recent comparative policy work from the OECD (2026) similarly highlights the need for coherent systems, credible quality arrangements and accessible provision. These issues create a rationale for examining how microcredentials are experienced from the learner's perspective, rather than assuming that shorter provision necessarily leads to wider participation.

The Erasmus+ MESHE (Microcredentials Exchange System for Higher Education in Europe) project aims to strengthen university lifelong learning through a better understanding of microcredentials and exploration of their recognition and exchange between European universities. Its wider activities address institutional cooperation, portability, stackability and the conditions that enable microcredentials to have meaningful value across educational settings. A key dimension of the project is the focus on learners' experiences, motivations and challenges with microcredentials. In surfacing the learner perspective, the project team recognises the absence of the learner voice in many policy and institutional discussions on the topic of microcredentials. The project's activities therefore gather this vital perspective through learner focus discussion groups, stakeholder consultations and a learner questionnaire. The resulting transversal analysis is intended to identify the principal challenges, needs and motivations reported by those consulted which will later inform the development of the project's Advocacy and Motivation Pack for learners.

This report focuses on three key research questions:

- What motivates learners to undertake microcredentials?
- What challenges do learners experience or anticipate with microcredentials?
- What conditions influence whether such learning is understandable, feasible, accessible and worthwhile from their perspective?

The report's primary contribution is an integrated analysis of the data collected through the project. Published academic and policy literature is used to contextualise and critically examine key findings. The analysis also distinguishes issues that learner-facing information can address from wider structural conditions requiring action by education providers, employers, recognition bodies or policymakers.

2. METHODOLOGY

The analysis provided in this report is exploratory and qualitative led. It integrates data collected from learner focus discussion groups (87 samples), stakeholder consultations (26 samples) and a learner questionnaire (45 samples).

The learner focus discussion group evidence comprises reports from sessions held in Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Türkiye, together with discussions facilitated through the European Students' Union (ESU). To support consistency across the partner-led focus discussion groups, the MESHE consortium developed and circulated a common methodological guide and facilitator briefing and discussion script (see Annex 2 and 3). The guidance required participating university partners and the European Students' Union to organise at least one focus discussion group, with an indicative group size of six to ten lifelong learners. Sessions of approximately 90 minutes were recommended, preferably conducted face-to-face, although online delivery was permitted. Partners were advised to appoint a moderator and a separate notetaker. The common facilitator script provided a structured framework for exploring learners' perceptions of microcredentials, their motivations and practical barriers to participation, recognition and progression, opportunities for European exchange, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Facilitators were encouraged to use open questions, remain neutral and allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own language, rather than directing discussion towards predetermined conclusions. This shared framework was intended to support thematic comparability across partner settings while allowing participants to introduce context-specific experiences and concerns. Although common guidance was provided, the available partner reports did not consistently document the actual number of participants, duration or delivery format of individual sessions. Consequently, the analysis can establish that a common methodological framework was used to guide the consultation activities, but cannot verify that all sessions followed identical arrangements.

Stakeholder evidence was collected from consultations aimed at gathering perspectives from employer and civil society stakeholders on how learners perceive microcredentials, what motivates them to enrol, and what barriers may limit participation. Nine organisations contributed to these consultations: five representing NGOs or civil society organisations, two representing public authorities and two representing universities or education providers. More detailed information on the sectors or organisational contexts represented was not available.

The questionnaire dataset includes 45 responses from learners reporting on their experiences of microcredential learning. Questions were framed around respondents' current courses, including their motivations for enrolment, experiences of participation, perceived value and challenges encountered. The questionnaire did not explicitly distinguish between respondents currently enrolled and those who had recently completed their courses. Questions permitting multiple selections are reported as the number and percentage of respondents selecting each option; totals need not equal 100%. Percentages are also rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total 100%. Respondents represented a range of adult age groups: six (13%) were aged under 25, 16 (36%) were aged 26–34, eight (18%) were aged 35–44, seven (16%) were aged 45–54 and seven (16%) were aged 55–64. One respondent (2%) preferred not to disclose their age. In terms

of gender, 29 respondents identified as female (64%), 15 as male (33%) and one (2%) preferred not to disclose their gender. The sample was predominantly highly educated. Twenty respondents (44%) reported a master's degree as their highest completed qualification, 12 (27%) a bachelor's degree, seven (16%) a doctorate and four (9%) a short-cycle higher education qualification. One respondent (2%) reported a Level 8 Certificate under the 'Other' category, while one (2%) preferred not to disclose their educational attainment. Regarding employment status, 24 respondents (53%) were employed full-time, six (13%) part-time and two (4%) were self-employed. A further eight (18%) identified as students, one (2%) as both employed full-time and a student, two (4%) as unemployed and seeking work, and one (2%) as being on long-term sick leave. One respondent (2%) preferred not to disclose their employment status. Overall, 33 respondents (73%) reported being in employment, including the respondent who was also a student. Nine respondents (20%) reported regular caring responsibilities. 24 (53%) indicated that they had previously participated in university lifelong learning or continuing education before their current course. Eighteen (40%) had not previously participated in such learning, while three (7%) were unsure. Respondents reported a diverse range of nationalities, with Irish (11 respondents; 24%) and Spanish (eight respondents; 18%) forming the largest groups. However, nationality should not be interpreted as indicating the country in which respondents were studying or residing. These characteristics provide important context for interpreting the findings. In particular, the high levels of educational attainment and substantial representation of employed learners suggest that the questionnaire primarily reflects the perspectives of individuals already engaged in higher education or continuing learning. The findings should not therefore be assumed to represent the circumstances of adults who have not previously participated in higher education or microcredential learning.

An initial evidence matrix organised material into nine provisional transversal findings (see Annex 4). The emerging transversal findings were subsequently presented and discussed at the MESHE Peer Learning Seminar in Brussels on 16 September 2026. Project partners and invited external experts were asked to consider whether the emerging patterns were consistent with their national and institutional experiences, identify findings that required qualification, and highlight missing or distinctive perspectives. The seminar also brought the learner evidence into dialogue with the industry and stakeholder consultations. This process provided an opportunity for collective interpretation and critical examination of the emerging findings. The seminar discussions are therefore used to contextualise, refine and challenge the analysis rather than to establish the prevalence of particular experiences across Europe.

The analysis proceeded by comparing recurring themes across the partner focus group reports, stakeholder consultations and questionnaire responses, while retaining differences between national and learner contexts. Questionnaire results were used descriptively to indicate the frequency of selected responses within the sample, rather than to establish population-level prevalence. Qualitative evidence was used to explore the circumstances, meanings and tensions underlying these responses. Where findings differed between groups or settings, these differences were retained as part of the analysis rather than resolved into a single overarching interpretation.

Relevant peer-reviewed research and European or international policy publications were also mapped against the nine provisional findings. The literature was used for three purposes:

- to establish the policy and conceptual context
- to compare the project findings with existing scholarship
- to identify tensions or alternative explanations

Several limitations to this research should also be acknowledged. The primary evidence is drawn from a relatively small, self-selecting group of participants, with the questionnaire comprising 45 respondents already engaged in or reflecting on microcredential learning. Although demographic and background information was available for questionnaire respondents, comparable participant profiles were not consistently documented across the partner focus group and stakeholder consultation reports. Similarly, while common methodological guidance and a structured discussion script were provided for the learner focus groups, the available reports did not consistently record the actual size, duration or delivery format of individual sessions. The stakeholder consultation reports also did not provide sufficient information to establish a comparable sectoral profile of participants. These limitations restrict the extent to which differences can be systematically examined according to demographic characteristics, stakeholder sectors or consultation

arrangements. The findings cannot be considered representative of European adult learners, particularly those who have not participated in microcredential learning, nor can they establish causal relationships or the effects of microcredentials on employment. Findings arising in individual partner settings are therefore treated as context-specific rather than nationally representative patterns.

3. LEARNER MOTIVATION AND PERCEIVED VALUE OF MICROCREDENTIALS

The MESHE consultations indicate that learners approach microcredentials with multiple, sometimes overlapping purposes. The questionnaire provides a descriptive picture of motivations among respondents who had already participated in learning, while the focus group discussions illuminate how participants judge whether a particular offer is worth pursuing. These are related but distinct questions: motivation concerns why a learner seeks education; perceived value concerns what the learner expects to gain from the time, effort and money invested. Neither should be equated with an observed employment or progression outcome.

3.1 Professional development

Professional development was the most frequently selected enrolment motivation in the MESHE learner questionnaire: 36 of 45 respondents (80%) selected “to improve my professional skills”. 14 (31%) selected progression in their current job, and 11 (24%) selected changing career or exploring a new field. Because respondents could select multiple options, these are overlapping rather than mutually exclusive groups. The German, Estonian and Irish focus group reports describe participants sharing their desire to update knowledge, maintain professional competence, respond to changes in work, test a possible career change or develop a targeted capability without necessarily committing to a full programme. The central attraction is not brevity for its own sake, but the prospect of learning that is timely and applicable. The systematic review by Bruguera et al. (2022), which synthesised 48 studies of learner perspectives, similarly identifies immediate professional needs and employability among recurrent motivations. Varadarajan et al. (2023) also observe that different stakeholders approach microcredentials with distinct expectations: learners seek practical, up-to-date knowledge and skills, while employers look for intelligible evidence of competence.

3.2 Personal development

Career-related goals were not the only motivation for learners to engage in microcredentials. 19 of 45 questionnaire respondents (42%) selected personal interest or curiosity as a reason for enrolling on a microcredential. Focus group summaries also refer to intellectual interest, personal growth, renewed confidence and the desire to engage in learning at different life stages. This is analytically significant because microcredential policy is often framed through skills shortages, workforce adaptability and employability. Those are legitimate objectives, but a learner-centred account must also recognise the intrinsic and social value of education. The European Students’ Union (2026) argues that microcredentials should complement broader higher education rather than fragment it into narrowly employer-driven units, and that student-centred learning and inclusion should remain foundational. The MESHE evidence supports retaining personal and professional learning within the same account of value; it does not support assuming that all learners make decisions solely on the basis of immediate economic return. An Irish focus group with predominantly retired or semi-retired participants foregrounded the joy of learning, mental stimulation, belonging and renewed confidence rather than career advancement. Conversely, discussions with postgraduate business school students in Spain and footwear-sector workers in Türkiye centred on occupational relevance and professional advancement as they discussed promotion opportunities, salary increases, sector recognition and workplace efficiency. This contrast reinforces the need to assess value against learners’ own purposes, not only employment outcomes.

3.3 Relevance and practical application

The distinction between enrolling and evaluating an experience is visible in the questionnaire. Relevance of course content was selected by 31 of 45 respondents (69%) among the aspects particularly valued; 24 (53%) selected practical skills gained, and 17 (38%) selected career relevance. Looking ahead, 28 respondents (62%) selected relevance to career goals as a factor likely to influence a future microcredential decision. The German, Irish and Estonian focus group participants wanted to know what they would be able to do after completing a microcredential and how the learning would connect with a real problem, task or transition. This helps explain why the same learner may value both academic quality and immediate applicability. Venaruzzo and Diaz (2025), in their learner-experience study, report that industry relevant case studies, contact with professionals and opportunities to apply skills can sustain motivation. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Ha, Van Dyke and Spittle (2026) also identify a distinction between student and employer perceptions of employability value, cautioning against treating their expectations as interchangeable. The transversal interpretation is that relevance operates as a judgement made by learners in context. A technically well-designed course may still have limited appeal if its intended audience cannot see how the outcomes connect to their circumstances. Conversely, a short and attractive course may fail to deliver perceived value if its advertised relevance is not borne out in the learning experience. Clear, specific statements of learning outcomes and likely applications are therefore more useful than generic claims that a course is “career enhancing”.

3.4 Recognition and progression

For many participants, value extends beyond the learning experience to what the credential will enable afterwards. 14 of 45 respondents (31%) selected gaining a recognised qualification as an enrolment motivation. 17 (38%) valued recognition or certification as part of their current experience and 18 (40%) said employer recognition would influence future participation. The Austrian and Estonian focus groups, alongside ESU-led discussions, highlighted the value anticipated by learners in completing a microcredential both in academic terms (including credit, transfer, stacking and progression) and labour market terms (including whether employers or professional bodies understand and respect the credential). Participants in the Austrian focus group explicitly wanted recognition claims to distinguish guaranteed arrangements from case-by-case decisions, with transparent information on ECTS, learning outcomes and assessment. Cedefop (2023) also places trust and perceived exchange value at the centre of end-user engagement with microcredentials. In addition, Kiiskilä, Kukkonen and Pirkkalainen (2023) examine how learners perceive digital credentials and the information that enables their use. Together with MESHE, these studies suggest that certification is not automatically valuable simply because it exists: its usefulness depends partly on whether relevant audiences can interpret and recognise what it certifies.

3.5 What makes a particular opportunity attractive?

The learner evidence separates the initial impulse to study from the evaluation of a particular offering. Professional competence, personal interest and career exploration can each generate interest; perceived relevance then links that interest to a specific course. The judgement of value is not confined to the certificate: some respondents emphasise usable skills, others formal recognition or progression. These are different decision criteria, not competing explanations. For MESHE’s learner-facing materials, the practical test is whether a prospective participant can recognise a concrete purpose: a capability they will develop, a problem they can address or an opportunity they can explore. This preserves a broad lifelong learning rationale without assuming that employability is the only legitimate outcome.

4. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The evidence presented in Section 3 indicates that learners have substantial reasons to pursue microcredentials. Motivation, however, is not equivalent to capacity to participate. This section considers the practical, informational and relational conditions that can prevent interested learners from enrolling, engaging fully or continuing.

4.1 Time

Time was the most frequently reported challenge in the questionnaire: 26 of 45 respondents (58%) selected time constraints. Work commitments were reported by 16 (36%) and family or caring responsibilities by eight (18%). As the questionnaire permitted multiple selections, these figures describe overlapping pressures rather than mutually exclusive groups. They reinforce accounts in the partner focus groups of adults managing study alongside employment, travel and family life. The amount of work required is also a distinct concern from whether a course is nominally short. In the questionnaire, 23 of 45 respondents (51%) indicated that the microcredential they had completed required somewhat or significantly more time or effort than expected. This does not demonstrate that all courses were poorly designed, but it points to a potentially consequential mismatch between expectations and lived workload. Learners need to understand not just overall duration or credit volume, but anticipated hours per week, synchronous attendance requirements, assessment details, deadlines and the extent of independent study. The transversal finding from the data is not simply that adults are busy. It is that participation becomes more precarious when institutions fail to make the demands of learning sufficiently predictable. A course can be short in calendar duration and still be difficult to accommodate within a working or caring week.

4.2 Flexibility

Flexible scheduling was selected by 27 of 45 respondents (60%) as a factor that would influence future participation, while 21 (47%) selected a preference for online learning. These related but different responses suggest that delivery mode alone does not resolve the scheduling problem. The focus group data describes demand for asynchronous access, recordings, accessible resources, stable timetables and assessment arrangements that accommodate adult responsibilities. The Austrian report describes participants for whom commuting and family commitments made fully online options especially important; the French and Spanish reports similarly raise the feasibility of travel and attendance. At the same time, flexibility should not be equated with the elimination of human interaction. Qualitative accounts also value discussion, peer learning and opportunities to establish relationships. The design challenge is to identify which activities genuinely require live interaction and which can be undertaken at a suitable time and pace of learners' choosing, with equivalent support and accessibility. Venaruzzo and Diaz (2025) situate learner experience within the realities of work, family and online participation; the OECD (2026) treats flexibility as a multidimensional design issue. Together with the MESHE evidence, this supports an approach that considers time, place, pace, assessment and the predictability of commitments.

The discussions at the Brussels Peer Learning Seminar further complicated the interpretation of flexibility. Participants distinguished between flexibility of location, timing, pace and assessment, while emphasising that predictable arrangements may be as important as the availability of choice. A French example highlighted the consequences of inflexible assessment arrangements when a learner experienced a family emergency. Estonian participants reported a preference for clear schedules established from the outset, while Spanish participants valued online access combined with opportunities for live interaction. An external expert also cautioned that increasing flexibility without sufficient structure and support may create difficulties for learner persistence. These observations reinforce the need to define flexibility in relation to learners' circumstances rather than treating it as an inherently positive or uniform feature of provision.

These differing perspectives reflect a broader design tension evident across the focus groups. Participants in an Irish focus group strongly preferred local, in-person provision because it enabled social connection and peer support, while the French discussion emphasised remote access to avoid burdensome travel and the Austrian discussion demanded explicit information on asynchronous study and assessment windows. No single delivery format can be treated as inherently inclusive across these settings. A useful qualification is that 36 of the 45 questionnaire respondents (80%) nevertheless reported that their current course fitted their life quite well or very well. This positive experience should be reported alongside the barriers as it demonstrates how learners may value an offering and manage to participate while still encountering considerable pressures. The relevant design question for universities then becomes which mix of place, pace and social contact works for a particular target learner population.

4.3 Affordability

13 of 45 respondents (29%) identified cost as a barrier encountered during their course; 21 (47%) selected cost as a factor influencing a future decision. The focus groups and stakeholder consultations add that affordability may depend on employer funding, access to subsidies and the learner's employment circumstances. Direct fees are only part of the cost: travel, childcare, time away from paid work and the need for equipment or connectivity may also affect affordability. The stakeholder evidence points to the importance of organisational arrangements such as employer financial support. For MESHE, this means that presenting microcredentials as inexpensive because they are small would be misleading. Affordability is contextual, and policy responses may be necessary beyond improvements in course level communication.

4.4 Information and transparency

Evidence from the focus groups indicates that some prospective learners do not readily understand what the term "microcredential" signifies or how it differs from other short courses. Uncertainty among learners concerns the level and status of an award, the awarding institution, ECTS or other credit, assessment requirements, opportunities to stack learning, and whether employers or other institutions will recognise the result. These concerns connect directly to Section 3's analysis of value: if the nature of the credential is unclear, its prospective value is difficult to assess. Transparent learner-facing information should therefore specify learning outcomes, target audience and prerequisites, expected workload, delivery and attendance requirements, assessment, full cost, award and level, quality assurance and any confirmed progression arrangements. The Una Europa (2024) framework, the European Commission (2025) implementation review and UNESCO's (2025) discussion of transparency, trust and transferability provide a similar policy rationale. Information should distinguish established recognition arrangements from aspirational or proposed pathways as clarity is itself a condition of informed choice for learners.

4.5 Academic confidence and digital participation

7 of 45 respondents (16%) identified confidence in their ability to study as a challenge, while 4 (9%) reported digital or technical difficulties. These are smaller counts than time constraints, but their significance should not be dismissed. For some learners, the prospect of assessment, academic writing, unfamiliar digital platforms or returning to formal study after a long absence can affect whether an opportunity feels genuinely achievable. The qualitative reports and stakeholder consultations point to the value of onboarding, accessible materials, timely formative feedback, peer connection, clear guidance and validation of prior learning.

The barriers identified in this study, however, are not uniform. A learner with strong professional experience may need support translating that experience into academic assessment; another may need accessible digital delivery; a third may be unfamiliar with institutional processes. Universal design and clear support pathways are therefore preferable to assuming that every learner requires the same intervention. Venaruzzo and Diaz (2025) foreground the learner experience of online provision, while Pouliou (2025) and the European Students' Union (2026) caution against treating the existence of flexible credentials as sufficient evidence of inclusion. An Irish focus group adds a specific account of the transition into university learning: unfamiliar referencing, written assignments and presentations could become more daunting than the subject matter, with peer support and approachable tutors helping learners persist to course completion. This underscores how accessible design concerns assessment culture and belonging as well as technology.

4.6 Intersection of barriers

The interaction of constraints experienced by learners is also important to highlight. Work and caring demands can combine with concentrated assessment deadlines; fees may be manageable for an employer-sponsored learner but decisive for someone paying personally; unfamiliar systems can compound low academic confidence. While 36 of 45 respondents described a course fitting their lives quite or very well, this does not cancel the 26 respondents reporting time constraints. It shows that satisfactory participation and substantial effort can coexist, and that respondents may successfully negotiate barriers without finding the arrangements easy. Different delivery designs also create trade-offs. Asynchronous learning can widen scheduling choice for learners but reduce

opportunities for engaging with peers; fixed timetables may foster belonging while excluding shift workers or carers.

A meaningful account of flexibility therefore asks who benefits from a particular arrangement, who bears its costs and which alternatives are available. For MESHE's learner-facing outputs, the immediate implication is to provide practical decision support: a realistic sample study week; plain language information about workload, assessment and award status; questions to ask about funding and employer support; and signposting to academic, digital and accessibility services. Provider and policy action is also required on timetabling, affordable access, recognition and protected learning time. The advocacy pack can help learners navigate these conditions, but it cannot substitute for institutions and employers making participation feasible.

5. THE VALUE AND RECOGNITION OF MICROCREDENTIALS

The value of a microcredential extends beyond the learning experience itself to how that learning is understood, recognised and used by learners, educational institutions and employers. This section examines the different forms of recognition that learners seek, the opportunities for progression and portability, and the conditions under which microcredentials can acquire wider academic and professional value. It also considers the distinction between the intrinsic value of learning and the external recognition of that learning, recognising that learners may prioritise these dimensions differently according to their motivations and circumstances.

5.1 Understanding the value of recognition

Recognition emerges from the MESHE evidence as a key condition shaping the anticipated value of microcredentials. Learners may seek formal academic credit, acknowledgement from employers, evidence of competence, a route into further study or a combination of these. These purposes overlap, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. The transversal question is whether learners can understand what a credential signifies, who recognises it and what - if anything - it enables them to do next. The focus group and stakeholder summaries reinforce the importance of being able to explain the currency and use of a microcredential. At the same time, the strong questionnaire emphasis on relevant content and practical skills (31/45 and 24/45 respectively) cautions against assuming that the credential itself is always the principal benefit. For some learners, the ability to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills may be more immediate than any formal progression opportunity. Recognition should therefore be understood as one component of perceived value, interacting with relevance, learning quality and feasibility. The learner questionnaire, nevertheless, indicates that formal recognition matters to a substantial group, although it is not the sole reason for participation. 14 of 45 respondents (31%) selected obtaining a recognised qualification as a motivation for enrolling, while 17 of 45 (38%) identified recognition or certification among the aspects valued in their experience. Employer recognition was selected by 18 of 45 (40%) as a factor that would influence a future decision.

5.2 Stackability and progression pathways

European policy frameworks emphasise clear descriptions of learning outcomes, workload, assessment, quality assurance and recognition arrangements. The Una Europa framework (2024), the European Commission implementation review (2025) and OECD (2026) offer relevant institutional and systems perspectives. In the questionnaire, 17 of 45 respondents (38%) identified the possibility of building towards a larger qualification as a factor in future participation. This suggests that progression matters to a meaningful segment of the sample, but not necessarily to all learners. Some seek discrete professional updating or personally enriching learning and may have no immediate interest in a larger award. The MESHE analysis should therefore avoid treating stacking as the universal destination for microcredential participation. Academic recognition involves questions of award level, credit, quality assurance, validation of prior learning and eligibility for subsequent study. Stackability can be attractive where individual units can contribute towards a larger qualification; however, the existence of credits or a digital certificate does not automatically establish an agreed progression route. A pathway has practical meaning only where the receiving institution has defined the conditions under which learning is accepted, including any restrictions on credit transfer, admission, currency or curricular fit.

5.3 Employer recognition and labour market relevance

Cedefop (2023) highlights the importance of end-user circumstances and the exchange value of credentials; Varadarajan, Koh and Daniel (2023) examine the different expectations of learners, employers, institutions and government. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Ha, Van Dyke and Spittle (2026) further distinguish student and employer perspectives on employability-related microcredentials. Together, these sources support treating employer recognition as relational and context dependent, rather than as an intrinsic property of a certificate. The MESHE questionnaire is not a longitudinal employment outcomes study and cannot establish causal effects on recruitment, promotion or earnings. The learner evidence suggests, however, that practical relevance is a foundation of this value proposition. Relevance of content was selected by 31 of 45 respondents (69%) as something valued in their course, and relevance to career goals by 28 of 45 (62%) as a factor in future decisions. Such responses should be read alongside, rather than substituted for, the 18 respondents selecting employer recognition. They indicate that a learner can judge learning to be useful without knowing whether an employer will formally acknowledge the resulting award. Employer recognition is thus distinct from academic recognition. A credential may carry academic credit yet remain unfamiliar to recruiters or line managers; conversely, a targeted learning experience may be valued in a workplace because of the skills it develops even where no formal credit transfer is possible. Stakeholder consultations associated microcredentials with changing skill requirements, professional development and the need for clearer employer understanding of credentials. These observations identify a plausible demand for legibility and trust, not evidence of universal employer acceptance.

The Brussels Peer Learning Seminar highlighted a further distinction between employer recognition at the point of enrolment and recognition following completion. At the outset, employer recognition may be demonstrated through financial support, protected learning time or encouragement to participate. Following completion, recognition may take the form of acknowledgement in recruitment, career progression, professional responsibilities or other workplace opportunities. These forms of recognition are related but not equivalent. Employer willingness to fund learning does not necessarily demonstrate that a credential will subsequently influence promotion or recruitment decisions. This distinction reinforces the need for research and institutional communication to specify what is meant by employer recognition and what evidence supports particular claims.

5.4 Portability, transparency and trust

Across the MESHE evidence, uncertainty about terminology, award status and progression is best treated as an information and systems challenge. A learner-facing description should make clear:

- Who awards the credential
- Level and credit value, where applicable
- Assessed learning outcomes
- Quality assurance arrangements
- Whether and where credit may be recognised
- Whether any employer or professional body endorsement is documented

A promise of “stackability” or “industry recognition” should not be made unless the relevant arrangements exist and can be substantiated. Portability is particularly relevant to learners whose careers or studies cross institutions, sectors or national borders. Yet portability is not simply a technical matter of issuing a digital record. It depends on whether another organisation can interpret and trust the learning represented, and whether it has procedures for acting on that information. The European Students’ Union (2026) also cautions that microcredentials should retain educational quality, student-centred learning and inclusion rather than become fragmented, narrowly transactional awards. For the MESHE advocacy and motivation pack, the implication is to communicate recognition with precision rather than promotional generalities. Materials should help learners ask what they will learn, what award they will receive, who will recognise it and which progression routes are confirmed. For institutions and policy actors, the implication is to develop transparent credit and recognition practices, engage employers without overstating labour market

endorsement, and ensure that flexible learning is not disconnected from credible educational pathways. The evidence points to three distinguishable dimensions of value:

- Learning value: the skills, knowledge and confidence gained
- Signalling value: whether others can understand and trust what the credential represents
- Progression value: whether it can contribute to a further academic, professional or career opportunity

Learners may prioritise these dimensions differently according to their goals and circumstances.

6. BEYOND MOTIVATION: THE CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

The synthesis of the MESHE data identifies three questions that are linked but analytically distinct:

- Is the learning relevant to a purpose the learner values?
- Is participation feasible under their actual circumstances?
- Is the resulting learning or award credible and usable in the setting that matters to them?

Taken together, these questions suggest what may be described as a participation-alignment lens: an evidence-informed way of examining whether the relevance of a learning opportunity, the feasibility of participation and the anticipated usability of its outcomes align sufficiently with a learner's circumstances and purposes. This is proposed as an interpretive and practical framework emerging from the MESHE analysis, rather than as an empirically validated model of learner behaviour.

Five clear tensions arise in the MESHE data:

1. Motivation versus opportunity: many respondents were strongly oriented towards professional learning, but interest cannot overcome incompatible timetables or unavailable funding.

2. Short duration versus predictable effort: 23 of 45 questionnaire respondents found the effort somewhat or significantly greater than anticipated. The relevant design question is not only the total hours, but whether attendance, weekly study demands and assessment peaks are communicated realistically.

3. Learning benefit versus credential exchange value: a learner may apply new knowledge immediately while remaining uncertain whether an employer or university will recognise the award. Academic credit, labour market signalling and actual progression require separate evidence; they cannot be inferred from satisfaction with the course.

4. Formal eligibility versus experienced access: an open admissions route or online platform does not guarantee that a learner understands the requirements, can use the technology or feels able to participate. Conversely, some participants report a good fit despite significant competing responsibilities. Both experiences must remain visible.

5. Individual choice versus shared responsibility: learners make decisions, but providers set assessment rules and support arrangements, employers influence study time and workplace recognition, and system actors shape funding and credit portability. The evidence supports a multi-actor account of participation rather than locating success or failure solely with the learner.

It is clear from the activities undertaken by the project to date that there is no single microcredential learner. Personal enrichment and employment-related goals can coexist; online delivery may be liberating for one learner and isolating for another; credit-bearing pathways may matter to some but not to those seeking standalone learning.

Drawing on the transversal findings, seven key questions have been developed as a provisional framework for considering how learners may assess a microcredential opportunity:

- Awareness - Do I understand what opportunities are available?
- Relevance - Does a course connect with my personal goals?
- Value - Will the learning or award count?
- Feasibility - Can I fit it in my life and afford it?
- Access - Am I able to enter and succeed on the course?
- Experience - Is it worth completing?
- Realisation - Can I apply my learning in my own context or can I build on it?

These questions can be organised into a pathway, but it is important to highlight that the stages are deliberately diagnostic: learners can revisit them in different orders, and learner motivation may change throughout.

Figure 1: Key questions framework

This provisional pathway offers a practical tool for considering learner-facing questions, institutional responsibilities and potential indicators at different points in the learning journey. At each stage, MESHE partners can identify a learner-facing question, a provider or employer responsibility and a measurable indicator - for example, understanding of workload before enrolment, access to support during study or documented recognition after completion.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MESHE AND WIDER PRACTICE

7.1 Design around demonstrable learner relevance

The analysis suggests that MESHE should begin course and learning support design with the purposes learners bring to study, rather than assuming a single employability-oriented learner profile. In the questionnaire, 36 of 45 respondents (80%) selected improving professional skills, while 19 (42%) selected personal interest or curiosity (these were multiple response items, not mutually exclusive groups). Providers should therefore articulate both the capabilities developed on a microcredential and the settings in which they may be applied, while leaving space for personal, civic and intellectual purposes of learning. The literature similarly cautions against reducing microcredential value to an exclusively labour market proposition (Bruguera et al., 2022; European Students' Union, 2026). For MESHE, a practical output would be a learner-facing course profile that specifies intended audiences, learning outcomes, examples of practical application and any prerequisites.

7.2 Make workload and flexibility transparent and credible

Time is the clearest reported practical challenge: 26 of 45 questionnaire respondents (58%) identified time constraints, while 27 (60%) selected flexible scheduling as a factor influencing future participation. The implication is not simply to move teaching online or offer shorter courses. Learners need a realistic picture of the hours required, the distribution of live and asynchronous activities, assessment deadlines and the scope for pacing or deferral. The learner experience literature also supports attending to the interaction between study, work and family responsibilities (Venaruzzo and Diaz, 2025). MESHE could, for instance, develop a minimum workload transparency template: indicative hours per week; details of compulsory attendance; overview of

assessment types and due dates; expected digital tools; opportunities to catch up; and a sample learning week. Course teams should then assess whether flexibility is genuine across time, place, pace and assessment, while retaining opportunities for interaction for learners who value a social learning experience.

7.3 Treat recognition as a clearly explained set of possibilities

Recognition has several meanings in the evidence: useful learning, a credible signal to employers and an opportunity for academic progression. These should not be conflated. The questionnaire indicates that 17 of 45 respondents (38%) identified the possibility of building towards a larger qualification as an influence on future participation. This does not mean that all learners require a stackable award, nor that a particular pathway is currently guaranteed. Cedefop (2023), Varadarajan et al. (2023) and the European policy literature emphasise the importance of intelligible credentials and trusted recognition arrangements. For each offering, MESHE partners should distinguish what is confirmed from what is prospective: awarding body; level and credit, where applicable; quality assurance arrangements; assessment; whether the award can be combined with others; whether a named progression route exists; and what recognition by employers is evidenced rather than hoped for. Where progression depends on separate admissions or validation of prior learning decisions, that condition should be explicit. Cross-border portability should be presented as an area requiring institutional and system-level arrangements, not as an automatic feature of microcredential certification.

7.4 Build inclusion and support into the learning journey

Short microcredential provision may lower some entry barriers but does not automatically create equitable access. The qualitative evidence raises the importance of confidence, clarity, digital participation and support; these issues warrant attention even where they are less frequently selected in the questionnaire than time constraints. Existing participants cannot fully represent people who never enrolled. The European Students' Union (2026) and Pouliou (2025) provide a useful critical lens on the risks of treating flexibility or labour market relevance as sufficient evidence of inclusion. MESHE should therefore consider plain language pre-entry guidance, accessible digital materials, early orientation to learning platforms and assessment expectations, and visible routes to academic, accessibility and administrative support. Providers could review whether fees, schedules, assumed prior knowledge or assessment conventions disproportionately exclude particular groups. Any claims of improved inclusion should be tested through access, retention and learner experience data, ideally including feedback from prospective learners who decide not to enrol.

7.5 Coordinate institutional, employer and policy responsibilities

The transversal findings locate participation within an enabling environment. Providers control programme design, guidance and academic quality; employers may influence funding, study leave and the perceived usefulness of the microcredential; and public authorities and qualifications systems shape wider recognition and access. This aligns with the multi-stakeholder perspective identified by Varadarajan et al. (2023) and with the system-coherence issues discussed by OECD (2026). The stakeholder consultations are informative about these interdependencies, but they do not establish a uniform European employer position.

7.6 Evidence-to-action priorities

The following mapping (*Figure 2*) translates the principal findings of the transversal analysis into proposed actions and identifies the actors best placed to address them. It distinguishes between challenges that can be addressed through learner-facing information and those requiring changes in institutional practice, employer engagement or wider policy. The proposed actions are recommendations for development and testing, rather than interventions whose effectiveness has already been demonstrated.

EVIDENCE	INDICATOR	ACTION TO TEST	KEY STAKEHOLDERS
Relevance and practical value	31/45 respondents valued content relevance; focus group accounts connected learning to personal and professional purposes.	Provide clear learning outcomes, practical examples and learner stories illustrating different motivations and potential applications.	Education providers; MESHE Advocacy and Motivation Pack
Time and workload transparency	26/45 reported time constraints; 23/45 found the workload greater than expected.	Provide realistic information about weekly study hours, attendance requirements, assessment schedules and the distribution of workload.	Education providers; MESHE Advocacy and Motivation Pack
Flexibility and learner diversity	27/45 selected flexible scheduling as a factor influencing future participation; qualitative accounts revealed differing preferences and constraints.	Develop flexible and predictable delivery arrangements, including appropriate choices concerning time, place, pace and interaction. Communicate these arrangements clearly to learners.	Education providers; employers (where protected learning time is required); MESHE Advocacy and Motivation Pack (information and guidance)
Recognition and progression	17/45 selected the possibility of building towards a larger qualification as a factor influencing future participation; qualitative evidence highlighted uncertainty about recognition.	Specify confirmed credit, stackability, progression and employer recognition arrangements, distinguishing established pathways from potential opportunities.	Higher education institutions; employers; recognition and qualifications bodies; MESHE Advocacy and Motivation Pack (explanation and signposting)
Inclusion and navigability	Partner reports identified challenges relating to confidence, terminology, accessibility, digital participation and entry guidance.	Provide plain-language information, learner readiness guidance, accessible orientation and clear support pathways. Review institutional barriers affecting access and participation.	Education providers; MESHE Advocacy and Motivation Pack; policymakers (where structural barriers require intervention)

Figure 2: MESHE findings against suggested actions for different actors

7.7 Implications of the Brussels Peer Learning Seminar for the Advocacy and Motivation Pack

The MESHE Peer Learning Seminar in Brussels on 16 September 2026 provided an opportunity to critically examine the emerging transversal findings and consider their implications for the development of the Advocacy and Motivation Pack. The discussions made three contributions to the analysis: critically reviewing and qualifying the emerging findings, translating the evidence into practical learner-facing resources, and clarifying the boundaries between what an advocacy pack can achieve and what requires wider institutional or systemic action.

The discussions broadly reinforced the importance of relevance, flexibility, recognition, transparency and learner support, while highlighting differences between national, institutional and learner contexts. In particular, participants challenged the assumption that greater flexibility necessarily improves accessibility, emphasising the importance of predictable arrangements, appropriate assessment practices and opportunities for human interaction. Differences in the meaning and practical application of recognition were also highlighted, particularly between academic recognition, employer acknowledgement and progression opportunities. The seminar further reinforced that learners approach microcredentials with different motivations, including professional advancement, personal enrichment and wider social purposes. These contributions supported the emerging transversal findings while cautioning against presenting them as uniform experiences across Europe.

The seminar's small-group discussions considered how the evidence could inform practical resources addressing five interconnected themes: the value proposition of microcredentials; recognition and progression; flexibility and feasibility; confidence and inclusion; and different learner journeys. Participants proposed accessible explanations of microcredentials, standardised programme information, a question-and-answer resource, visual representations of the European higher education and lifelong learning landscape, learner testimonials and a readiness checklist to support prospective learners in assessing their circumstances and goals. The emphasis was on enabling informed decisions rather than simply promoting participation. These proposals provide an evidence-informed starting point for the design and subsequent testing of the Advocacy and Motivation Pack, rather than established solutions whose effectiveness can be assumed.

A particularly important outcome of the seminar was the distinction between challenges that can be addressed through learner-facing information and those requiring changes in institutional practice or wider policy. The pack can directly improve understanding of microcredentials, communicate their potential value and support transparency concerning workload, assessment and available opportunities. It can also help learners navigate questions of confidence, recognition and progression, but cannot independently resolve the underlying barriers. Affordability, funding arrangements, programme flexibility, employer recognition and institutional progression pathways depend on decisions and practices beyond the scope of the pack. This distinction reinforces the wider transversal finding that meaningful participation in microcredential learning is a shared responsibility involving learners, education providers, employers and policymakers.

Taken together, the Brussels discussions strengthened the interpretation of the project evidence and provided a clearer basis for translating the findings into the next phase of MESHE. They also reinforced the importance of maintaining a distinction between the potential contribution of learner-facing advocacy and the institutional and systemic conditions necessary to make microcredential opportunities genuinely accessible, credible and worthwhile.

8. CONCLUSIONS

MESHE identifies a gap between the attraction of targeted learning through microcredentials and the conditions that make participation viable. Across the learner reports, questionnaire and stakeholder consultations, relevance, workload clarity and recognition emerge as important, although their relative significance differs by learning context. The lesson for universities is that microcredentials, although shorter than other university offerings, are not intrinsically accessible. Course design must account for concentrated workload, competing responsibilities and differences in what learners mean by flexibility. Positive experiences coexist with barriers; neither should be used to erase the other. Nor does a certificate carry a uniform value. Useful learning, a trustworthy signal of achievement and an actionable progression route are related but separate possibilities. Providers should communicate each with the specificity it warrants, avoiding implied guarantees of credit transfer or employment benefits. The core finding from the MESHE data is that microcredentials can expand opportunities, but their promise is realised only when relevant learning can be undertaken and its outcomes meaningfully used.

Venaruzzo and Diaz (2025) provide a learning experience design framework focused on motivation, self-regulation and the application of learning. Varadarajan, Koh and Daniel (2023) synthesise opportunities and challenges for learners, employers, institutions and governments. Cedefop (2023) examines the exchange value of microcredentials and the role of trust, while the OECD (2026) analyses the alignment of microcredential systems. MESHE does not replace these frameworks. Its contribution instead connects the learner's purpose, the lived feasibility of taking part and the anticipated or realised usefulness of the outcome, informed by contrasts between professional, postgraduate and community-based learning contexts.

The findings were further examined through the MESHE Peer Learning Seminar in Brussels, where partners and external experts considered their consistency with different national and institutional experiences. This process broadly reinforced the importance of relevance, feasibility, transparency and recognition, while introducing important qualifications concerning the meaning of flexibility, the diversity of learner motivations, differences in employer support and the limitations of learner-facing information. The seminar also helped distinguish challenges that could be addressed through the Advocacy and Motivation Pack from those requiring changes in institutional practice or wider policy. These discussions strengthened the practical interpretation of the findings without removing the methodological limitations of the underlying evidence.

This report proposes an evidence-informed participation-alignment lens for understanding microcredential engagement. It suggests that relevance to a learner-defined purpose, the feasibility of undertaking the learning and the credibility or usability of its outcomes must align sufficiently for participation to be meaningful. Together with the provisional seven-stage learner pathway, this lens offers a practical basis for examining where learning opportunities may fail to connect with learners' needs and circumstances. Both approaches require further testing across different learner populations and institutional settings. For MESHE, the next step is to develop an advocacy and motivation pack for learners based on the findings here.

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ANNEX 1 | WHAT IS MESHE?

MESHE is an ERAMUS+ project funded under the Partnership for Cooperation Call, in the field of education and training. It aims to foster a culture of lifelong learning (LLL) across Europe by promoting the understanding and value of microcredentials and exploring a system to facilitate their exchange and recognition between European universities. This approach seeks to strengthen collaboration among universities, while supporting quality assurance, recognition and portability across borders.

Despite their growing availability, microcredentials are not yet reaching their full potential, largely because learners do not fully understand their value, the opportunties they offer and how they can complement traditional qualifications. MESHE seeks to address this challenge by highlighting how microcredentials can support professional development, upskilling, career progression and personal learning. University lifelong learning plays a crucial role in this process, helping learners access relevant learning opportunities throughout their lives.

The project has three main phases:

1. **Advocacy** – putting learners at the centre by gathering evidence about their needs, motivations, challenges and expectations, and using these insights to communicate the value of microcredentials.

2. **Guidance** – supporting universities in strengthening cooperation with peer institutions and exploring approaches to the recognition and exchange of microcredentials across institutions.

3. **Policy** – engaging policymakers and relevant stakeholders to promote the conditions needed to improve how microcredentials are designed, delivered, recognised and used across Europe.

The MESHE consortium is formed by:

- EUCEN, BE (Coordinators)
- University College Cork, IE
- Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, DE
- Tallinn University, EE
- Université Clermont Auvergne, FR
- Universität für Bodenkultur Wien, AT
- Bogaçizi University, TR
- UPF – Barcelona School of Management, ES
- European Students Union, BE
- Rubix Consultancy Ltd, IE

The project external experts are:

- Pascal Paschoud, UNIL-EPFL, CH
- Christelle de Beys, ULB, BE
- Edith Hammer, UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, DE

ANNEX 2 | GUIDE TO SET UP MESHE FOCUS DISCUSSION GROUPS

What is a MESHE Focus Discussion Group?

A *Focus Discussion Group* (FDG) is a structured conversation with a small number of participants (usually 6 to 10 lifelong learners) who share their experiences and views on a specific topic. In MESHE, the topic is microcredentials and the challenges adults face when returning to learning. We need to explore also which could be the concerns and worries that make learners doubt about enrolling or not in such programmes.

Format:

- Sessions can be online, but we strongly recommend you **organise it face to face**
- We suggest a **90-minute** session
- Find a **good moderator** who knows what we want to find out and guides the discussion so everyone can contribute comfortably
- The Facilitator/Moderator Briefing and Facilitator/Moderator Script is included in the WP2_AdvocacyPack
- In addition to a moderator, bring a **good notetaker** who can note and summarise key points quickly and efficiently
- The Focus Discussion Group sessions must be done **by April 2026**
- The designed feedback form (in WP2_AdvocacyPack folder) should be prepared by the facilitator and included at the end of the session. Participants must complete this (will be anonymous)

The input collected should help us shape better learning opportunities for mature learners across Europe.

ANNEX 3 | FOCUS DISCUSSION GROUP FACILITATOR BRIEFING

The goal of this focus group is to generate authentic insight into learner perceptions of microcredentials, not to explain, justify, or promote them. Your role is to create space, not to lead participants toward particular conclusions. Here are some guiding principles to help you achieve this goal.

Stimulate Discussion - But Value Silence

- Ask open questions.
- Allow pauses. Silence often indicates thinking.
- Do not rush to fill gaps.
- Resist the urge to “rescue” the conversation.

Stay in the Learner’s Language

- Avoid translating responses into institutional or policy language.
- Do not summarise in terms like “stackability,” “portability,” or “European frameworks” unless participants use those terms.
- Reflect back in the words participants use.

Do Not Correct or Educate

- If participants misunderstand microcredentials, do not correct them.
- Misconceptions are data.
- The purpose is to understand perception, not to fix it in the moment.

Do Not Sell Microcredentials

- Avoid defending higher education.
- Avoid persuading participants of benefits.
- Avoid listing advantages unless directly asked.
- Stay neutral - even if criticism feels uncomfortable.

Manage Time Actively

- Keep track of timing for each section.
- Move the conversation forward if one topic dominates.
- Ensure all key thematic areas are covered.

Balance Participation

- Invite quieter participants in gently:
  “We haven’t heard from you yet, what’s your view?”
- Intervene diplomatically if someone dominates:
  “Thank you, let’s hear from someone else.”
- Avoid creating confrontation; manage airtime respectfully.

Probe for Experience, Not Opinion

If discussion becomes abstract, ask:

- “Can you give an example?”
- “What would that look like for you personally?”
- “How would that affect you?”

Notice Emotion

Emotion often reveals more than content. Pay attention to:

- Hesitation
- Frustration

- Skepticism
- Enthusiasm

Avoid Leading Questions
Avoid:
- "Wouldn't that be helpful?"
- "Surely that's a good idea?"

Instead ask:
- "How does that land with you?"
- "What concerns might you have?"

Hold Neutral Body Language
- Nod without signaling agreement.
- Avoid evaluative reactions.
- Maintain curiosity.

Remember
You are not representing your institution.
You are not defending policy.
You are not testing knowledge.
You are listening for:
- Motivation
- Barriers
- Trust
- Recognition
- Credibility
- Inclusion

The quality of insight depends on your neutrality.

Room Setup (Before Participants Arrive)
- Seats in a circle (no tables if possible)
- Name badges/labels
- Flipchart with first page displaying the following messages: No right answers; One person speaks at a time; All perspectives matter
- Timer visible to facilitator

Support Roles (Arrange in Advance)
- Notetaker – As the facilitator will be busy guiding the discussion, it is essential to have a second person present to act in the capacity of notetaker so all the participants' views and ideas can be captured. This is important for the report that each focus discussion group host will need to complete after the event. This person does not engage in the discussion but captures (without bias) the views of participants.

Facilitator Script

1. Welcome & Framing
Thank you for joining today.

- Short overview of the MESHE project & how the information collected will be used
- Circulate permission forms for signing
- Short explanation of a Microcredential (Paraphrase EU Definition)

The purpose of this session is to explore perceptions, barriers, and opportunities around microcredentials and university lifelong learning. There are no right or wrong answers - we are interested in experiences and viewpoints. My role as facilitator is to facilitate the discussion and get you talking, not to teach, persuade, or defend microcredentials.

2. Ground Rules
A few quick rules I want to set before we start:

- We listen fully.
- We speak from our own experience (or persona experience).
- We allow space for quieter voices.
- We avoid judging others' views.
- Everything shared stays in this room.

Can I get your agreement to all of this before we proceed?

3. Warm-Up
Let's begin with a simple question.
Please introduce yourself and tell us:

- Your name
- Where you are in life and/or career right now
- What learning currently means to you
- When was the last time you learned something new for work or personal reasons.

Go around the circle. Do not comment too much. Nod, reflect briefly.
If someone dominates:
Let's pause there - I'd love to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet.

4. Exploring Attitudes to Microcredentials
When you hear the term *microcredential*, what comes to mind?
(Allow silence. Let discomfort sit for a moment.)

Follow-ups:

- Is that positive, negative, neutral? (Do a show of hands and ask someone to explain their opinion)
- Would you see them as (do a show of hands and ask someone to explain their opinion for each option):
    - A stepping stone to further learning or a full qualification?
    - A supplement to your previous studies?
    - A replacement for your previous learning?
    - Valuable?
    - Not valuable?
- How do think they compare to a traditional degree?

If conversation becomes too abstract:
Can you answer from your personal situation? Would *you* take one?

If conversation becomes too institutional:
I'm interested in your experience as a learner, not what universities intend.

5. Barriers & Practical Realities
What would make microcredentials relevant for your work or personal goals?
What would make it possible/enticing for you?

- More flexibility around timing?
- Online or in-person delivery?
- Learner supports available?
- Recognition of microcredential beyond your local university?
- Option to stack towards a larger award?
- Anything else?

What would realistically prevent you from enrolling in a micro-credential? (do a show of hands and ask someone to explain their opinion for each option)

- Cost?
- Time?
- Family?
- Employer recognition?
- Confidence in your ability to learn?
- Digital skills?
- Anything else?

How could these obstacles be removed?

If needed:
I'm noticing different priorities in the room - that's helpful. Can we explore that difference?

6. European Exchange & Recognition
Imagine you could take a short course from another European university and have it recognised locally. Would that appeal to you? Why/why not?
Follow-ups:

- What concerns would you have about cross-border recognition?
- Do you think employers in your region would understand it?

Push gently:

- If recognition was guaranteed across institutions, would that change your view?
- What information would you need to feel confident enrolling?

7. Inclusion & Equity

- Do you feel universities are designed with learners like you in mind?
- When have you felt included?
- When have you felt excluded?

Probe:

- Language?
- Academic culture?

MESHE Transversal Analysis – Learner motivations, challenges and enabling conditions for participation in microcredentials
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Project coordinated by **eucen** | https://meshe.eucen.eu | meshe@eucen.eu
Co-funded by the European Union

- Flexibility?
- Assumptions about time/money?

This is often where the richest insights emerge. Let it breathe.

8. Closing Questions

- If universities genuinely wanted to support lifelong learners like you, what would they do differently?
- What would make you recommend a microcredential to someone like you?

Finish

Before we conclude today, is there anything else you would like to add or contribute that hasn't been covered here today?

Thank you for participating today and sharing your thoughts and opinions.

I will now share a QR code here on the screen for you to complete the feedback survey which is required by all participants. Please take 5 mins to complete this survey before you depart.

ANNEX 4 | TRANSVERSAL ANALYSIS MATRIX

	Transversal finding	SOURCE-DERIVED[1]: Learner FDG evidence	SOURCE-DERIVED[1]: Learner questionnaire evidence	SOURCE-DERIVED[1]: Stakeholder consultation evidence	TRANSVERSAL ANALYSIS[2]: Cross-source interpretation	IMPLICATIONS[3]: Advocacy / motivation pack	IMPLICATIONS[3]: Wider institutional / policy	Cross-source pattern[4]
1	Motivation exists; the challenge is converting it into participation.	Across FDGs, learners were generally positive about lifelong learning and short, targeted upskilling. Motivations included professional development, career progression/change, maintaining accreditation, personal growth and adapting to changing work.	36/45 enrolled to improve professional skills; 14/45 for progression in current job; 19/45 for personal interest/curiosity; 28/45 would definitely take another micro-credential and 14/45 possibly.	Stakeholders linked demand to non-linear careers, evolving job roles and immediate skills gaps, and saw shorter agile learning as aligned with modern working life.	The main issue is not a lack of willingness to learn. Participation depends on whether existing motivation can be converted into a realistic, worthwhile learning decision.	Avoid generic messages telling adults they should learn. Show why a specific opportunity is relevant, feasible and valuable for a learner's current goal.	Providers, employers and policy actors need to remove practical and structural friction rather than treating non-participation as a learner-attitude problem.	Present across all three evidence strands.
2	Relevance and practical utility are central foundations of learner value.	FDGs repeatedly prioritised targeted, practical, career-relevant learning, rapid upskilling and opportunities to test or enter new fields.	Most valued: relevance of content 31/45; practical skills gained 24/45; career relevance 17/45. Relevance to career goals was the top future decision factor (28/45).	Stakeholders emphasised immediate, specific skills needs, visible links to jobs, promotions, industry needs and career pathways.	Flexibility enables participation, but relevance is what makes the investment worthwhile.	Lead with outcomes: what the learner will be able to do, what problem is solved, which skill is gained, and what career/learning pathway it supports.	Co-design with employers, sectors and learners; maintain rapid content updating and explicit labour market relevance without reducing all learning to narrow employment outcomes.	Present across all three evidence strands; learner questionnaire gives particularly clear quantitative support.
3	Time and underestimated workload are major practical constraints.	Time repeatedly emerged as a major barrier, especially alongside full-time work, caring & travel. Learners wanted clear information on weekly workload, attendance and assessment demands.	26/45 reported time constraints; 17/45 work commitments; 8/45 family/caring responsibilities. 23/45 said the course required somewhat or significantly more time/effort than expected.	Stakeholders also highlighted time and manageable duration; one consultation summarised the issue as 'Cost is not the motivation, time is.'	Short duration does not automatically mean manageable learning. Unclear or underestimated workload undermines the micro-credential value proposition.	Give a realistic sample week and state total hours, weekly hours, synchronous time, asynchronous work, assessment effort and key deadlines before enrolment.	Workload transparency should become a common quality/information standard; employers should provide protected learning time where possible.	Present across all three evidence strands; time is the most frequently selected questionnaire challenge.

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4	Flexibility must be designed around adult lives, not reduced to online delivery.	Learners valued online/blended options, recordings, transcripts, stable timetables and choice, but also noted that some group work and relationship-building benefit from in-person interaction.	Future decision factors: flexible scheduling 27/45; online learning options 21/45. 36/45 said their current course fitted their life quite well or very well.	Stakeholders identified flexibility as both a motivator and an enabling condition, particularly for working adults and carers, and called for dedicated learning time and flexible organisational practices.	Flexibility means predictability and manageability across time, place, pace, attendance and assessment, not simply 'online'.	Replace vague claims such as 'flexible' with concrete delivery information and sample schedules; show where learners have choice and where commitments are fixed.	Providers should design multiple participation routes where possible; employers should support scheduling flexibility and study time.	Present across all three evidence strands.
5	Recognition is a condition of value, not merely an added benefit.	FDGs repeatedly asked whether employers and universities would recognise microcredentials and valued ECTS, stackability, portability, certification and labour market signaling.	Recognition/ certification was valued by 17/45; employer recognition would influence future participation for 18/45; ability to build towards a larger qualification for 17/45.	Stakeholders stressed that employers need clear information on learning outcomes, assessment, level, workload, awarding body and stackability before recognition can be meaningful.	Credential value is relational: it is realised when education systems, employers and professional/sector bodies understand and use the credential.	Communicate four forms separately: academic recognition, employer recognition, cross-border portability and credential status/credibility. Use employer and learner examples.	Strengthen common recognition, quality and portability mechanisms; encourage employers to reference suitable microcredentials in recruitment, promotion, CPD and workforce planning.	Present across all three evidence strands.
6	Clarity and transparency are access conditions.	Learners showed uncertainty about the term 'micro-credential', its level, workload, recognition and stackability. Some felt 'micro' could imply lower quality or weak professional status.	Free-text responses called for clearer information on workload, course expectations, pathways and practical arrangements; access to support/information was also reported as a challenge by 4/45.	Stakeholders repeatedly identified unclear terminology and inconsistent information as major barriers and proposed a minimum information standard for every offer.	Opacity prevents learners from judging relevance, feasibility and value. Information quality therefore affects access, not only marketing.	Create a standard learner-facing information record covering purpose, target learner, outcomes, level, ECTS, workload, delivery, assessment, cost/funding, recognition and stackability.	Common information standards across providers would improve comparability, trust and employer understanding.	Present across all three evidence strands; strongest detail comes from FDGs and stakeholder consultations.

	Transversal finding	SOURCE-DERIVED[1]: Learner FDG evidence	SOURCE-DERIVED[1]: Learner questionnaire evidence	SOURCE-DERIVED[1]: Stakeholder consultation evidence	TRANSVERSAL ANALYSIS[2]: Cross-source interpretation	IMPLICATIONS[3]: Advocacy / motivation pack	IMPLICATIONS[3]: Wider institutional / policy	Cross-source pattern[4]
7	Confidence, accessibility and belonging shape whether formal access becomes real participation.	Learners described anxiety around academic writing, referencing, assessment, digital platforms, applications and unfamiliar university terminology. Accessibility barriers were also raised for disabled learners.	7/45 reported confidence in ability to study as a challenge; 4/45 digital/technical challenges. Qualitative responses highlighted the value of formative feedback, peer support and help returning to study.	Stakeholders called for guidance, mentoring, inclusive design and support for lower-qualified and non-traditional learners; VPL was seen as confidence-building and potentially pathway-shortening.	Being eligible to enrol is not the same as feeling able, welcome and equipped to succeed.	Include pre-entry orientation, 'what to expect' guidance, academic/digital onboarding, support signposting, peer stories and accessible formats.	Adult-friendly support and universal/inclusive design should be embedded in micro-credential development rather than added after programme approval.	Present across all three evidence strands; especially detailed in learner qualitative evidence.
8	There is no single micro-credential learner.	FDGs included working professionals, carers, career changers, mature returners, international learners, disabled learners, CPD learners and people motivated by personal development; priorities varied across groups.	The 45 questionnaire respondents span age groups, employment situations, caring responsibilities and educational backgrounds; future choices were influenced by different combinations of relevance, flexibility, cost, recognition and progression.	Stakeholders suggested working adults, career changers and returners may be especially important audiences and argued for differentiated offers, guidance and VPL.	Learner needs vary by life stage, starting point, goal and context. A single value proposition or delivery model will not suit everyone.	Segment communications around decision contexts (e.g. career accelerator, career changer, returning learner, mobile professional, personal-development learner) rather than one generic campaign.	Use differentiated pathways, entry points and levels; validate prior learning and experience; avoid creating an offer designed mainly around the traditional student.	Present across all three evidence strands; differentiation is strongest in qualitative evidence.
9	Participation is co-produced by an enabling ecosystem.	Learners' barriers often sat outside their control: employer support, cost/funding, recognition, timetabling, accessibility, administrative systems and portability.	Cost would influence future participation for 21/45; 13/45 reported current financial barriers. Learners also valued institutional reputation (14/45) and progression opportunities (17/45).	Stakeholders highlighted employer funding and learning time, provider-employer co-design, recognition frameworks, sustainable funding, quality signals and policy interoperability.	Learner motivation cannot compensate for weak systems. Participation emerges from interaction between learner agency and provider, employer, funding, policy and recognition conditions.	Be clear about what the advocacy pack can solve (understanding, confidence, value communication, navigation) and what requires structural action.	Assign responsibility across providers, employers, professional/sector bodies and policymakers; avoid placing responsibility for participation solely on the learner.	Present across all three evidence strands; system responsibilities are most explicit in stakeholder evidence.

Methodological note: [1] *Summarised source-derived evidence columns.*
[2] *Transversal interpretation developed from comparison across sources*
[3] *Implications derived from that analysis; they should not be read as verbatim participant views*
[4] *Evidence that support each finding rather than using an unexplained strength score*

MESHE TRANSVERSAL ANALYSIS

Learner motivations, challenges and enabling conditions for participation in microcredentials

What makes a microcredential worth pursuing? And what makes participation possible?

Microcredentials promise flexible, targeted learning opportunities, but how do learners really experience them? What motivates them to enrol, what challenges do they face, and what makes learning genuinely relevant, accessible and worthwhile?

Drawing on learner perspectives from seven European countries, questionnaire responses, stakeholder consultations and European research, this MESHE transversal analysis explores the motivations, expectations and realities behind microcredential participation.

The findings reveal a nuanced picture. Professional development matters, but so do personal interest and the joy of learning. Flexible provision can open doors, yet time constraints, unexpected workloads, affordability and uncertainty about recognition can stand in the way. A shorter course is not automatically an accessible one, and a certificate does not guarantee recognition or progression.

Moving beyond the assumption that microcredentials are simply smaller units of learning, this report offers a learner-centred perspective and a practical framework for understanding the conditions that make participation meaningful.

Discover what it takes to turn the promise of microcredentials into learning opportunities that work for learners.

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