

Innovative quality assurance for lifelong learning: Institutional certification and microcredentials



INQAAHE conference “The big bang theory: The quality assurance paradigm shift”
14 May 2025, 2:45 PM – 4:15 PM

EVALAG (Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg, Germany)
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EVALAG (Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg, Germany)

Guiding principle:

Support for higher education institutions in their commitment to high quality in teaching, learning, and research, as well as within the institution as a whole

- Accreditation and certification
- Evaluation
- Consulting
- Continuing education
- Contribution to strengthening self-governance and promoting a culture of quality



EVALAG (Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg, Germany)

Context:

- Baden-Württemberg in the South of Germany as a state with huge (mostly automotive, but also other) industry (Daimler, Bosch, Porsche, Lidl)
- High employer and political interest for high quality academic continuing education

Code of conduct

This workshop aims at interaction and exchange of experiences.

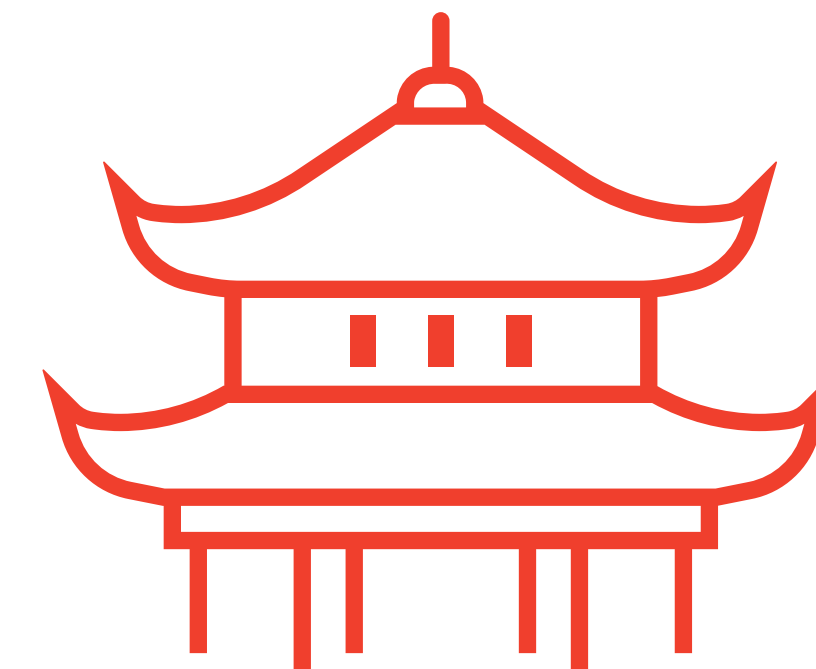
→ Please feel free to ask questions and contribute own experiences / points of view – both please by raising your hand first.



Warm-Up

Please stand up and position yourself in the room:

- Where do you come from? (Please take the room as a world map from North-South & East-West)
- How many hours did your journey to Tokyo take? (0 hours – 40? Hours)
- How many years do you already work in quality assurance?



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What comes to your mind when you think about microcredentials?

What comes to your mind when you think about lifelong learning?

Please discuss with your neighbours and type your answer(s) in
Menti (max. 3, each max. 25 letters each)

<https://www.menti.com/alvt7r7v112e> OR

www.menti.com & code: 4218 7063



What comes to your mind when you think about microcredentials?





Status quo & target of the session

Status quo: Rapid growth in demand for academic continuing education – due to societal and economic changes (e.g. the crisis of the automotive industry in Baden-Württemberg / Germany)

- Requirement for higher education institutions (HEIs) to adopt agile approaches to program development, planning & quality assurance
- Implementation of internal quality assurance mechanisms that support accreditation and certification beyond traditional cycles (e.g., the standard eight-year timeframe)

Workshop question:

How can HEIs adapt quality assurance processes
to foster innovative learning pathways in lifelong learning?

Agenda

- I. The shift from traditional teaching and learning to the paradigm lifelong learning
- II. Political endeavours for quality assurance of microcredentials
- III. Institutional certification model
- IV. Good practice: SAPS Ulm, Germany
- V. International approaches & good practices
- VI. Lessons learned

I.1 The shift from traditional teaching and learning to the paradigm of lifelong learning

Lifelong education /
adult education

Lifelong learning

Shift to the individual /
Individualisation

- **Paradigm shift along with individualisation processes:**
Shift from adult education / lifelong education to adult / lifelong learning (Barros 2012, Milana 2012)
- **Increasing relevance of participation & inclusion:** Higher education addresses a broader and more diverse audience beyond traditional students (HRK, 2023a)
- **Expansion of the role of HEIs:** To include academic continuing education within the quaternary education sector, encompassing adult education, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities → Increasing relevance of micro-credentials

I.2 The shift from traditional teaching and learning to the paradigm of lifelong learning: The role of quality assurance in higher education

- New demand for HEIs to balance quality assurance with agility, responding swiftly to market needs through flexible and high-quality offerings (HRK 2023b, p. 8)
- Need for internal mechanisms to support accreditation and certification processes that operate outside conventional timelines

II.1 Political endeavours for quality assurance of microcredentials: UNESCO Perspective (UNESCO 2022, p. 14)

- Agreement on the need for quality assurance, but processes are still unclear
- Power of educational qualifications often due to their quality assurance or trust in the institution **versus** micro-credentials that often not part of institutional or programme accreditation (as they are below a study degree) and lack transparency around standards (definition, criteria)
- **Differences of providers:**
HEI as traditional providers vs. companies and others as non-traditional providers
- **Possibility of certification of micro-credentials from non-traditional providers:**
Accredited education providers

II.2 Political endeavours for quality assurance of microcredentials: European Union perspectives (European Commission, 2022)

- Microcredentials as subject to internal and external quality assurance by the system producing them (e.g. HEI, labour market)
- Quality assurance processes must be:
 - Fit-for purpose
 - Clearly documented
 - Accessible
 - Meet the needs and expectations of learners and stakeholders
- External quality assurance:
 - Based primarily on the assessment of providers instead of programmes
 - Effectiveness of their internal quality assurance procedures
- Requirements to internal quality assurance:

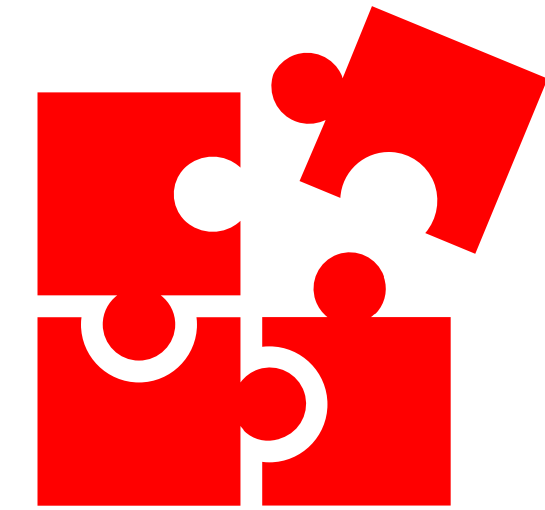
Overall quality of the micro-credential itself, based on different standards

Quality of the course, where applicable

Learners' feedback on the learning experience

Peers feedback on the learning experience

II.3 Think-Pair-Share



Please discuss the following questions together with your neighbour (6-7 min.)

What impact do individualisation and the shift towards the paradigm lifelong learning have on higher education institutions and their offers (e.g. design of study programmes, needs of students / participants)? What are your observations?

What do you think about political frameworks on micro-credentials? What would be needed to contribute towards the quality assurance of micro-credentials?

Afterwards, we discuss your findings in the plenary.

III.1 Institutional certification model: Process of the regular & shortened procedure



Shortened procedure

- GAP analysis based on folder case the HEI is asked to submit (e.g. consisting accreditation reports, e.g. for HEI with system accreditation)
- Self-evaluation report & on-site visit can be skipped

Regular procedure

- Includes self-evaluation report & on-site visit



III.2 Institutional certification model: Criteria & decision

Certification criteria following the European Standards & Guidelines (2015)



- No shortened procedure in Germany for the criteria „*Targets & profile*“ & „*Institution & governance*“ as German system accreditation only focuses „*Studies & teaching*“ and not other organisational parts of HEI as „*Research*“, „*Third mission*“ etc.
→ Submission of an self-evaluation report on those criteria by HEI in the shortened procedure
- VS. other countries where system accreditation that also focus other organisational parts of HEI

Decision about certification



III.3 Institutional certification model: Potential

1. **Enabling and maintaining continuous quality assurance for offers below study degrees that are not part of regular accreditation (microcredentials)**
2. **Meeting the dynamic requirements of lifelong learning & fast reactivity to societal and vocational needs (Cendon 2023, p. 14)**
Especially as an add-on to a system accreditation of HEI, institutional certification gives space to HEI to create own internal review processes (including external perspectives)
3. **Fostering innovation, flexibility and responsiveness beyond the standard accreditation cycles and enabling individual learning paths (ibid. & HRK 2023b, p. 9f.)**
Continuous assessment and certification of microcredentials by establishing an internal review process with external reviewer participation
4. **Aligning quality assurance with industry needs and the demands of lifelong learning:**
Including an external reviewer to the internal review process of microcredentials

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Please discuss with your neighbours:

- Do you have similar initiatives to support lifelong learning in your countries / hei?
- What do you think about the institutional certification model? What is good? What other potential do you see? What is missing?

III.4 37 institutional & programm certifications in Baden-Württemberg, within the project Hochschulweiterbildung@BW (2022-2024)

- State funding within the project „Hochschulweiterbildung@BW“:

25 employees for public higher education institutions to strengthen academic continuing education – especially offer development and marketing

Platform www.suedwissen.de

Quality assurance and certification of 22 programmes and 15 institutions – certified with the EVALAG seal

- Mile stone in the quality assurance of academic continuing education in Germany



WEITER.mit.
BILDUNG@BW

III.4 Campaign Südwissen in Baden-Württemberg, Germany within the project Hochschulweiterbildung@BW

Für alle, die es südwissen wollen | Mit der richtigen Weiterbildung deine Karriere boosten – YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY6rVB5n0ms>

III.4 Platform Südwissen in Baden-Württemberg, Germany within the project Hochschulweiterbildung@BW: www.suedwissen.de



WEITER.mit.
BILDUNG@BW

SÜDWISSEN

Search funtion following subjects, degree, teaching form

EVALAG seal for certified programmes / institutions

III.5 Quality assurances of micro-credentials: Opportunities & challenges

Differences

1. Higher flexibility of institutional certification / quality assurance of microcredentials

Opportunities

1. Reducing barriers between vocational and academic education (HRK 2023b, p. 10)
2. Contribution towards internationalisation (HRK 2023b, p. 10)
3. Recognition of prior learning (Cendon 2023, p. 14)
4. Fast reactivity to societal and vocational needs (Cendon 2023, p. 14)
5. Innovation, flexibility & individual learning paths (ibid. & HRK 2023b, p. 9f.)

Challenges

1. Clear definition and standards for quality assurance and recognition
2. Framework for the stackability of micro-credentials (Altherr & Wacker 2023, p. 50)

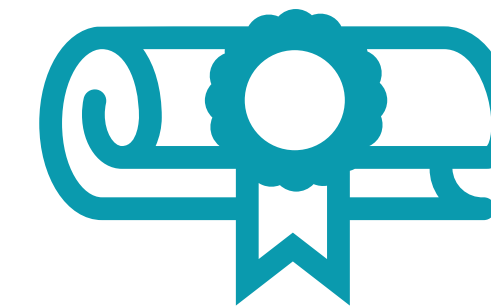
IV. Good practice: School of Advanced Professional Studies (SAPS) in Ulm, Germany

- Institutional certification of the SAPS together with the system accreditation of the University of Ulm → GAP analysis based on folder case on the criteria "Targets & profile of the institution" as well as „Institution & governance“ (EVALAG 2023, p. 7)
- Most offers develop from study programmes that already are included in the internal review process of the University of Ulm that is system-accredited (EVALAG 2023, p. 14)
- New microcredentials / learning nuggets are defined in a template following the German Qualification Framework (DQR) (EVALAG 2023, p. 13)



IV. Good practice: SAPS Ulm, Germany

- **Stackability:**
 - Micro-credentials (1-2 ECTS)
 - Micro-credential series (< 10 ECTS)
 - Certificate of Advanced Studies (≥ 10 ECTS)
 - Diploma of Advanced Studies (≥ 30 ECTS)
- SAPS Website with an overview of offers:
https://wissenschaftliche-weiterbildung.org/angebotssuche/?_sfm_abschlussart=112
- SAPS quality management guidelines:
https://www.uni-ulm.de/fileadmin/website_uni_ulm/adprostu/Informationen/qualitaetshandbuch.pdf
- Certification report (in German language):
<https://www.evalag.de/de/datenbanken/akkreditierungen-begutachtungen-und-zertifizierungen>
(Please type „SAPS“ in the search field“)



V. International approaches & good practices:

Please discuss in small groups:

- How can HEIs align their quality assurance processes with industry demands?
- How do national contexts influence HEI responses to market needs?

VI. Lessons Learned on innovative quality assurance for lifelong learning: Institutional certification and microcredentials

- Quality assurance should be easy and not complicated
- Difference whether the microcredentials is developed from the HEI itself or main requirements come from external partners (e.g. industry)
- Shift to certification of institutions / providers (similar to system accreditation) instead of programme certification

**„We have to build higher education by building bridges flexibility and stability,
bigger elements and small, flexible elements“**

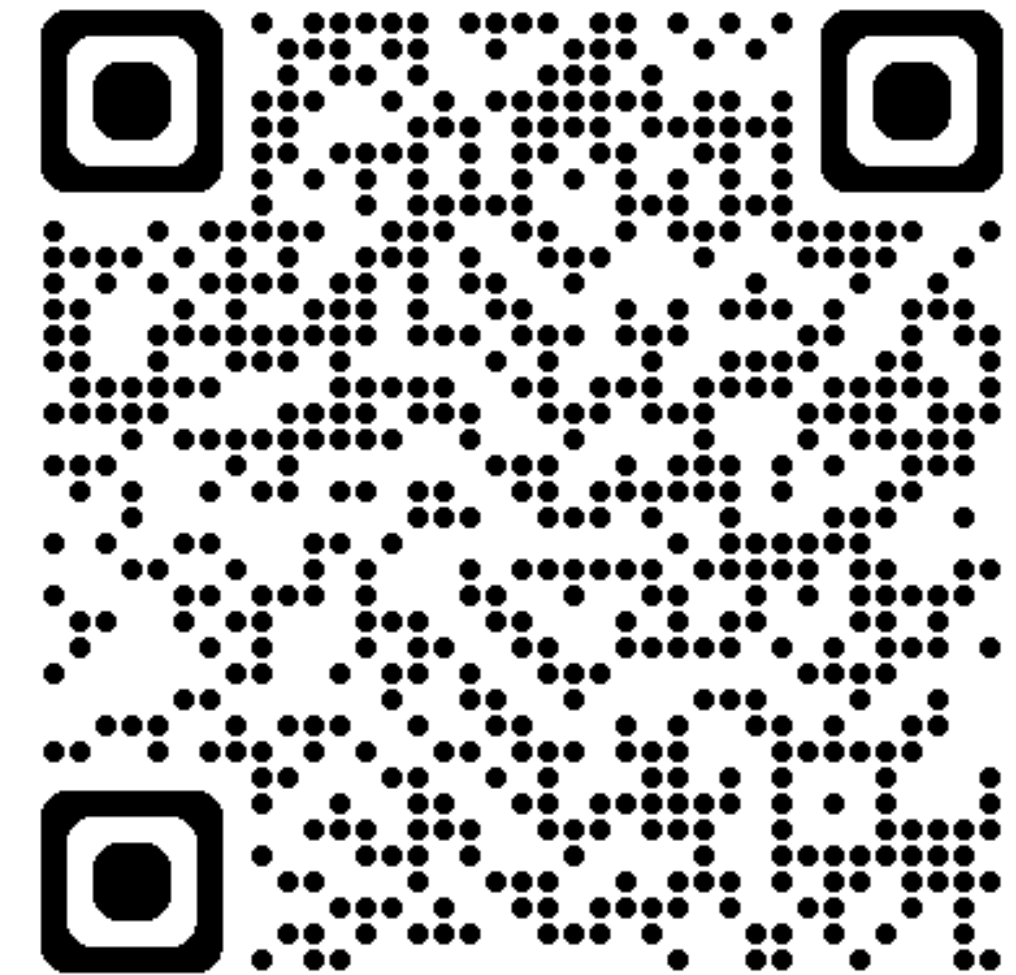
(Cendon 2023 zit.n. HRK 2023a, own translation from German)

Thank you very much for your attention & participation!

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