

Annex 9. Specificities for the review of short learning experiences

1. Introduction

Across Europe, increasing emphasis is being placed on the development of a wide range of learning experiences that are shorter than traditional qualifications and that support lifelong learning. These learning experiences are offered by both public and private providers in response to the demand for flexible forms of education and training that place the learner at the centre.

On 16 June 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted a [Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#). The Recommendation aims to support the development, implementation and recognition of micro-credentials across institutions, businesses and sectors, and across national borders. As a recognised quality assurance agency, VLUHR QA implements this Recommendation by offering a review procedure leading to certification for all forms of learning experiences other than traditional qualifications at EQF level 5 and above.

Participation in an external review procedure offers several advantages. It provides transparent insight into the quality of the learning experience and demonstrates the quality achieved in terms of effective education and opportunities for successful learning. In doing so, it informs prospective learners and professional stakeholders about the quality of the learning experience. This enhances the attractiveness of the learning experience and stimulates cooperation with the professional field. Furthermore, the external review procedure facilitates compliance with quality requirements and thereby supports national and international recognition. Finally, an external review contributes to the development and strengthening of the provider's internal quality culture.

Beoordelingsprocedure VLUHR KZ

The review procedure applied for short learning experiences by VLUHR QA supplements the VLUHR *Manual for Programme Review* (January 2020) and the *Manual for the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes* (January 2020). This makes it possible for the quality of a short learning experience to be reviewed for certification purposes alongside an ongoing programme review conducted for accreditation purposes under either the Programme Review procedure or the European Approach procedure.

By aligning with the regular review procedures, the procedure complies with the quality requirements set out in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG, 2015). The specific considerations associated with reviewing short learning experiences within a regular programme review are explained below.

Scope of the review procedure

Various forms of learning experiences may undergo external review. These concern learning experiences that:

- do not lead to a degree linked to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), namely associate degree (EQF 5), bachelor or advanced bachelor programme (EQF 6), master or advanced master programme (EQF 7), or doctorate (EQF 8);
- are offered by formal providers (universities of applied sciences and arts, universities, registered institutions and semi-private or private providers) as well as non-formal providers (companies, sector organisations, employers, public authorities, etc.);
- are offered either as stand-alone learning experiences or as part of a coherent set of multiple learning experiences, whether or not forming part of a programme at EQF level 5 or above.

These short learning experiences may vary considerably in size (expressed in credits, hours, days, etc.) and learning environment. Providers may use different terms to describe them, including learning pathways, webinars, advanced programmes, professional development courses, modules, continuing education programmes, micro-credentials and micro-degrees.

Review principles

The quality of a short learning experience is reviewed on the basis of four interrelated questions:

- What does the learning experience aim to achieve?
- How does the learning experience achieve this?
- How is it established that the intended outcomes have been achieved?
- How does the learning experience invest in the continuous enhancement of quality?

These questions determine the scope of the inquiry conducted for the purposes of the review. The scope of the inquiry has been specified by VLUHR QA and serves as a point of reference for both the provider and the panel in the review of a short learning experience. It forms an integral part of this manual and the underlying review procedures.

The four interrelated questions establish an explicit link with the ESG. The listed elements serve as guidance in the review process and should not be regarded as an exhaustive list of criteria.

The quality of a short learning experience is demonstrated through the presence of eight quality features. These quality features characterise a high-quality learning experience and are aligned with the ESG. Certification confirms the presence of these quality features. For every certified learning experience, the following quality features are assured:

1. The learning outcomes of the learning experience constitute a clear and specific interpretation of the relevant (international) requirements regarding level, content and orientation.
2. The content of the learning experience reflects recent developments in the discipline, takes account of developments in the professional field and is socially relevant.
3. The instructors involved in the learning experience provide learners with optimal opportunities to achieve the intended learning outcomes.
4. The learning experience offers learners adequate and easily accessible facilities and study guidance.
5. The learning environment encourages learners to take an active role in the learning process and contributes to smooth learning progression.
6. The assessment of learners reflects the learning process and operationalises the intended learning outcomes.
7. The learning experience provides complete and easily understandable information on all stages of the learner journey.
8. Information on the quality of the learning experience is publicly available.

In addition, the learning experience must ensure the involvement of internal and external stakeholders and experts as part of a continuous commitment to quality enhancement. Where applicable, the learning experience must also comply with regulations governing access to specific professions or positions.

Certification

The decision whether or not to award certification is taken by the VLUHR QA Board on the basis of a public report reflecting the findings of an external review panel. Certification is valid for a period of six years.

Certified learning experiences are entitled to use the quality label for six years. They are included in a database maintained by VLUHR QA and are registered in DEQAR, the database of external quality assurance results.

2. Preparation of the review

The procedure starts once the provider of the learning experience has submitted a written application using the application form (see Annex 2). In the application for a programme review, the provider specifies which learning experience(s), whether individual or grouped, should be included in the review.

3. Self-Evaluation

In the self-evaluation report submitted as part of the programme review, the provider additionally reflects on the quality of the learning experience using the review principles. The self-reflection serves as the panel's primary source of information and as a tool to stimulate reflection. As in a regular programme review, the self-reflection must be supported by all stakeholders and be structured, critical, analytical and forward-looking. The self-evaluation report demonstrates how and to what extent the learning experience meets the review principles, discussing both strengths and areas for improvement.

The maximum length of the self-evaluation report is increased by 5,000 words, irrespective of the number of learning experiences included in the review.

To enhance readability, a separate self-evaluation report for the learning experience may be submitted where appropriate.

4. Panel

Where the remit of a panel conducting a programme review is extended to include the review of a short learning experience, the following expertise requirements are strengthened:

- Educational expertise: at least one panel member has experience with the specific educational format of the learning experience and possesses knowledge and experience relating to lifelong learning.
- Professional expertise: at least one panel member has experience with labour-market entry, progression or reorientation within the relevant professional field.

All other panel requirements, composition procedures, tasks and roles remain unchanged.

5. Review process

During the panel training session, the panel is prepared for its additional task of reviewing the learning experience. The specific characteristics of the review framework are discussed.

During the preparatory consultation, arrangements are made with the provider concerning the way in which the panel's inquiry into the quality of the short learning experience will be organised. As a rule, the inquiry takes place during the site visit of the regular programme review. Where necessary, the site visit is extended to allow the panel to meet relevant stakeholders (responsible staff, learners, instructors, alumni, professional representatives, mentors, etc.) and to examine facilities associated with the learning experience. A separate site visit may be organised if required.

After completion of the inquiry, the project coordinator drafts a report reflecting the panel's findings, considerations and recommendations. The report contains a holistic and reasoned overall judgement of the learning experience. The panel also expresses a judgement regarding the intended and achieved level of the learning experience. The report is transparent and traceable in its reasoning and clearly explains the considerations underlying the panel's judgement. The report on the learning experience is separate from the report of the regular programme review.

The procedure for establishing the report is identical to that used in a regular programme review.

As a final step, the report is submitted to the QA Board, which verifies whether the report has been prepared in accordance with the manual. The Board may request additional information or clarification. The panel nevertheless remains fully responsible for the content of the report. Based on the panel's holistic and reasoned overall judgement, the QA Board takes a certification decision. The Board may reach one of the following decisions:

- **Positive decision with certification for six years**

The quality of the learning experience can be verifiably demonstrated on the basis of the review principles. Recommendations are never incompatible with a positive decision.

- **Conditional decision without certification**

The quality of the learning experience cannot be verifiably demonstrated with regard to specific aspects of the review framework. Any quality deficiency is explicitly substantiated by means of one or more conditions that must be met in order to remedy the deficiency. In addition to conditions, recommendations may also be formulated. In consultation with the provider, a deadline is set for meeting the conditions. This period may not exceed two years.

- **Negative decision without certification**

A new review following an earlier conditional decision demonstrates that the quality of the learning experience still cannot be verifiably demonstrated with regard to specific aspects of the review framework.

The reports and decisions are published on the VLUHR QA website. A positive decision results in certification of the learning experience. The provider may use the quality label and the learning experience is included in the VLUHR QA database and in DEQAR, the database of external quality assurance results.