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Paper

Title: Internal Quality Assurance as a Catalyst for sustainable, transnational collaboration: the case of the EUTOPIA Alliance

Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal role of existing Quality Assurance (QA) systems and processes in enhancing cooperation within European University Alliances, specifically drawing on the case of the EUTOPIA alliance and its Connected Communities model. The study examines how QA processes underpin the alliance's commitment to interdisciplinarity and transnational collaboration. Central to this analysis is the EUTOPIA model's bottom-up approach to identifying and scaling good practices in learning, teaching and research, which is instrumental in fostering a culture of knowledge exchange among staff and students across campuses.

The paper focuses on the implementation of two tools for recognising staff/student effort: the EUTOPIA Labels and Micro-credentials, both designed to acknowledge the efforts of staff and students participating in EUTOPIA's Connected Communities. These tools preserve the innovative space of the EUTOPIA Communities, allowing for adaptable bottom-up approaches that cater to diverse learner needs and interests. The proposed process takes the recognition of internal QA processes as its bedrock and intends to significantly reduce the administrative support needed for recognising effort and integrates results into the regular curriculum of the home universities.

This paper discusses the possible implications of our model for transferability of microcredits earned in one EUTOPIA institution to learning pathways in partner universities, providing students with more flexibility to tailor their education. The role of QA in this process is crucial, ensuring that the offerings meet the intended learning outcomes. We close the paper with implications for QA systems and the role of alliances for sharing good practice through micro-programming.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance systems are crucial to fostering pedagogic innovation, yet they are frequently seen as bureaucratic barriers that can impede new developments. While the need for standardisation is essential to enabling collaboration, it is also consistently identified as an obstacle to innovation. Achieving a balance between these competing priorities remains a priority which European Universities alliances need to address.

EUTOPIA is a student-centred alliance of ten like-minded universities from ten European countries. It aims to establish the foundations of a confederal inter-institutional model by installing and testing shared approaches to teaching & learning, research and innovation. Among others, this includes educational formats and pedagogical approaches that endorse the vision of connectedness and openness through connected learning pedagogies. The mission of EUTOPIA is to connect and transform universities into dynamic enablers for impact on societies. EUTOPIA delivers innovative and flexible mechanisms for challenge-based learning through its Connected (Learning) Communities (C(L)C) educational model and ensuing activities. The Connected (Learning) Communities¹ are integrated thematic networks where teachers, researchers, and students cooperate in cross-campus knowledge activities with the aim to further the competences needed by learners for professional and personal development by connecting academia, society, teaching and research and by fostering Inclusion.

The C(L)Cs use a co-creative approach to provide an environment that promotes critical thinking, ensure transferability of knowledge developing skills on interdisciplinary topics of global relevance and societal impact. The cross-campus partnerships follow bottom-up innovative learning and research practices involving students of all cycles (BA/MA/PhD and postgraduate). Within the C(L)Cs, academics collaborate with their peers from other EUTOPIA universities, sharing resources and developing

¹ For more information: <https://eutopia-university.eu/english-version/integrated-connected-communities>).

learning activities that engage students and community stakeholders across campuses. The activities within the C(L)Cs may be joint learning or research activities, guest lectures, projects, case studies, essays, hackathons etc., but they may also go beyond the immediate teaching and learning starting point of CLCs, resulting in research outputs and learning modules, or developing different testbeds for educational innovation.

To support the promising programming that comes from the C(L)Cs, we designed and report on a framework that recognises student contributions, assures that quality standards are met, integrates with existing degree programmes, and fosters the development of transnational pedagogical offerings in line with the strategic goals of European Universities alliances.

In more detail, EUTOPIA's educational model uses, as its core building blocks, existing credit bearing learning units (in the form of modules, seminars or assignments). These already form part of the study programmes currently offered by the EUTOPIA partners all of whom are committed to student-centred, research-led education. The learning units are selected according to four criteria: **interdisciplinarity, global orientation, active learning and inclusive pedagogy**. These units constitute the core and the conduit for establishing Learning Activities through which partners collaborate in relevant, complementary teaching and research. The C(L)Cs allow for flexible interinstitutional co-creation between staff, students and other societal stakeholders from all partner institutions. EUTOPIA, therefore, establishes a lean and robust core, drawing on existing provision for developing bottom-up innovation involving, from the start, students and staff on the process.

In this context, the development of two tools, the EUTOPIA label and the EUTOPIA microcredit as a certification process comes as a natural step as the communities reach maturity. This allows for the acknowledgement of the efforts of staff and students participating in EUTOPIA's C(L)Cs by creating the mechanisms for visibility and impact while preserving the innovative space of the EUTOPIA Communities. Several existing C(L)Cs have piloted the use of micro-credentials for their learning activities (the discipline areas of those C(L)Cs are diverse, ranging from Linguistics to Law to History and Medicine and others) and several others are in the process of piloting an EUTOPIA micro-credential. Moving however to institutionalising and embedding a process requires a robust interface with existing systems within each institution and national context. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities in this paper.

In furthering the efforts of recognising the staff/student effort, EUTOPIA leadership endorsed the testing of the implementation of EUTOPIA micro-credentials as well as the EUTOPIA labels in the existing C(L)Cs considering transferability mechanisms at intra alliance level. To support these efforts a Community of Practice for Connected Learning (CoP) was established, including experts in quality assurance from all EUTOPIA partners. The members of the CoP have been tasked with developing pathways and processes for implementing the EUTOPIA labels and micro-credentials. The aim is to move away from a project-based implementation approach towards a permanent offering that would maintain the added value and offer the possibility to scale up the approach to recognition. This allows a systematic recognition of the efforts of academics and students involved following a simplified procedure aligned with existing internal curricular structures and quality assurance procedures.

2. EUTOPIANISATION FRAMEWORK

The CoP works to facilitate the EUTOPIANISATION of existing provision) through the tools that we are piloting. Further, this is done by embedding the principles of co-creation and joint effort and by recognising the specific learning outcomes defined within the C(L)C. This is followed by the award of the EUTOPIA Label to the courses/learning units actively involved in the C(L)C partnership. Following the integration of the learning outcomes of the partnership activities into the learning material and pedagogical formats, the micro-credits can be awarded to all students who have successfully completed the EUTOPIA labelled courses where they are registered. This last stage will contribute to a significant reduction of the administrative support needed for editing the micro-credentials and ensure their integration in the regular curriculum of the home universities. The EUTOPIANISATION framework is schematically represented in the figure below:

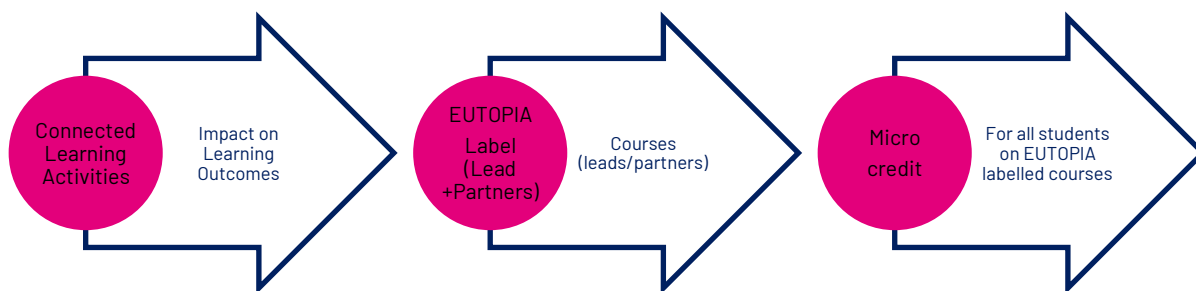


Figure 1. Proposal of a EUTOPIANISATION Process

To ensure the EUTOPIANISATION Process the Connected (Learning) Communities are expected to:

1. Follow adequate **quality assurance mechanisms** that ensure that the offering meets the intended learning outcomes, monitoring the impact of C(L)Cs.
2. **Award the label** within the programme description of the diploma supplement (ensuring the recognition of academic staff actively participating in connected learning activities and in creating the visibility for EUTOPIA)
3. **Award the micro-credential** as defined at the level of the Connected Community. Micro-credentials may be awarded as:
 - a. an integrated part of learning units/modules within the framework of a specific study programme (**intra-curricular** level) allowing the possibility to exempt a student from part of a study programme or
 - b. separately (**co-curricular** level), the micro-credential comes on top of a course, learning unit or qualification contributing to the expansion, diversification of a student's study journey.

Through enhancing and impacting the LO of courses shared across programmes, the reach and pathways to access to EUTOPIA increases. This provides an opportunity to a) embed at course level the outcomes of EUTOPIA collaboration through the C(L)Cs and b) build on a strong foundation for pushing programme level synergies amongst partners. Visually we represent this in Figure 2.

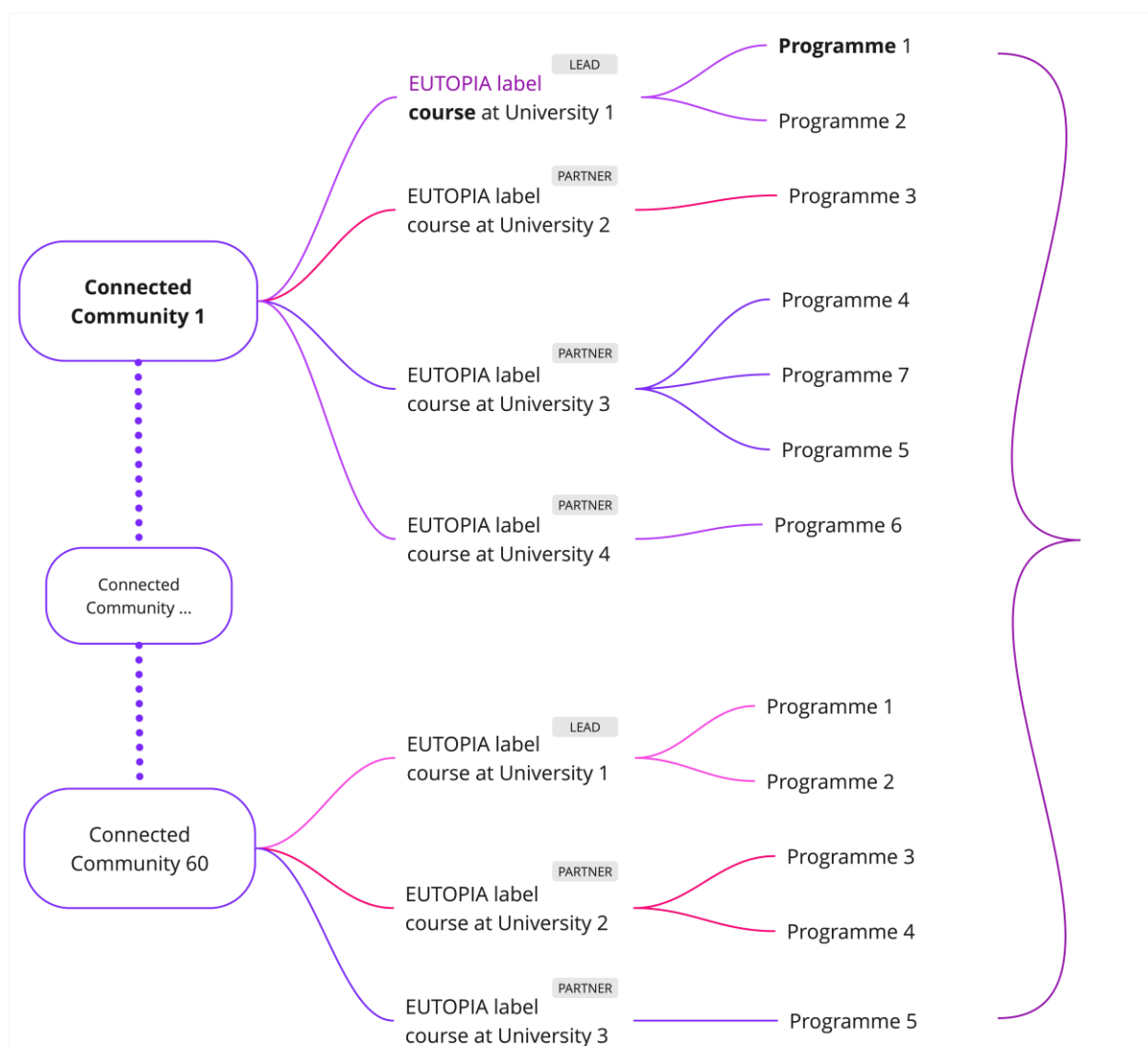


Figure 2. EUTOPIANISATION model

However, the EUTOPIA partners come with diverse institutional setups and different legal frameworks which apply to the use of tools we are experimenting with. The challenges of designing appropriate quality assurance mechanisms in our case is associated with C(L)C's unique pedagogical offering that aims to surpass the well-known challenges of degree programme collaboration as a starting point of connected learning activities. Table 1 provides a summary of the QA systems of partners relevant to the tools we discuss in this paper.

Overall, the mutual acceptance of the learning outcomes at intra alliance level generates the attractiveness of the EUTOPIA label and provides students with more flexibility to tailor their education following their career goals and interests.

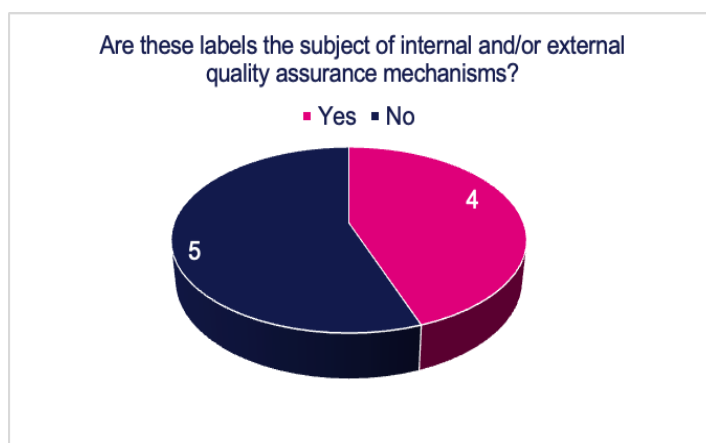
3. Towards a EUTOPIA label and EUTOPIA micro-credential

In implementing the EUTOPIANISATION Process an investigation was carried out into the practices at university level for awarding the EUTOPIA label within programme description and diploma supplement (intra curricular level), in allocating micro-credentials for learning units developed as part of Connected (Learning) Communities both for 'home' students as well as for students within other EUTOPIA partners (whenever possible) and finally for allowing for the possibility of transferring microcredits developed as part of Connected Learning at intra-alliance level.

The investigation, carried out through a Survey on 'Implementation of Recognition Tools across EUTOPIA' was intended to build an understanding of how the recognition system for each of the ten EUTOPIA partner university works and then to consider possibilities of integration within each system.

Possibility of implementing a EUTOPIA Label

The Survey reveals the different procedures undertaken by the different EUTOPIA partner universities in allocating a label, the processes and university interface handling the procedures for creating labels, as well as the barriers/limits in the creation of labels and possible ways universities can create visibility for a label in the description of the academic offering. While there is a diverse landscape of practices and approaches in the procedures employed for handling/approving of labels, overall, there are no significant or insurmountable barrier for the creation of such labels. Most universities can also incorporate and feature labels in the description of their academic offering.



Considering the internal and/or external quality assurance mechanisms for allocating labels, five out of nine universities have internal and/or external quality assurance mechanisms as part of awarding labels. With a view to the key elements considered as part of the label award assessment process, the respondents mentioned: course content, objectives, learning outcomes, and the roles of involved partners. Processing time in the award of labels can range from a few months to up to six months, depending on the complexity of the assessment and the workload of the actors involved.

Considering the process for amending/updating learning outcomes within a course at BA/MA/PhD level of the educational cycle, the Survey revealed that the requirements differ. Some universities undergo from a yearly to a once in 5-year process of updating learning outcomes, or an update per request, requiring a registration of such changes within a national platform.

Possibility of implementing a EUTOPIA micro credential

The second part of the Survey elicited insights into i.e., the legal frameworks and rules regulating the creation of micro-credentials at university level, into the existing mechanisms for the delivery of micro-credentials to a degree seeking student or lifelong learner and into the approaches and experiences of EUTOPIA partner universities in the co-creation and co-accreditation of learning activities.

The results revealed that while only some universities have a legal framework in place for micro-credentials, all(most) all universities within the EUTOPIA alliance have experience in delivering micro credentials or have considering introducing micro-credential to a degree seeking student or lifelong learner.

The responses of universities show a mixed picture in their approaches to award of micro-credentials . For some universities the offer of micro-credentials is part of a course or a specific workshop following its own methodology while in other cases this is limited to the upskilling and reskilling offered within a lifelong learning context. The responses reveal a complexity in ownership models, activity formats, pedagogical approaches and characteristics- as well as diversity in national and legal frameworks (see further details offered in Table 1 below).

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The respondents also describe a range of diverse approaches as part of their experience in co-creating and co-accrediting learning activities related to their academic offerings. Such activities concern the co-creation and co-accreditation of courses through various initiatives, the joint developments of blended programmes and workshops.

With a view to the EUTOPIANISATION process the respondents acknowledged the challenges of integrating and recognising connected activities in the home curricular and extracurricular offerings. The survey results provided valuable insights into the implementation processes surrounding labels and micro-credentials, highlighting critical considerations such as institutional regulations, quality assurance mechanisms, infrastructural capabilities, national frameworks, and necessary curriculum adjustments. These findings serve as a foundational resource for the subsequent development of a comprehensive roadmap aimed at establishing a robust recognition framework, which will delineate clear pathways for the effective utilisation of labels and the seamless integration of micro-credentials into academic programs.

4. Implications of the EUTOPIANISATION Model

Sustaining innovation and excellence in education is a well-known challenge for academia. The connected networks of staff, students and stakeholders establish a dynamic, international context for all partners involved, leading to a fertile environment for innovation and bottom-up change in existing pedagogic practice. We argue that building from existing good practice can provide a way to move beyond the pitfalls of harmonization and deliver innovation from within, achieving cultural change in the process. Furthermore, we argue that the EUTOPIANISATION model underscores the importance of robust quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that educational offerings meet intended learning outcomes and effectively monitor the impact of C(L)Cs. This is crucial for the recognition of academic staff and the visibility of EUTOPIA's initiatives, as well as for the awarding of micro-credentials at both intra-curricular and co-curricular levels. We also aim to show that EUTOPIA's model and tools offer a promising balancing act between pedagogical innovation and quality assurance processes that can provide a useful tool to similar pedagogical initiatives for transnational pedagogic collaboration.

Universities are increasingly exploring mechanisms to deliver alternative credentialing as part of their academic offerings despite the fragmentation of regulatory approaches and the discrepancies in the recognition and transferability of micro-credentials between institutions and countries. The challenges also lie in the different stages of development and approaches chosen by each institution. As an intermediate solution one possibility is to empower the community of academics in a C(L)C model as appropriate in the context of a specific connected learning experiment - to oversee the embedding of products of transnational collaboration at course level, following the internal quality assurance processes, using tools such as the EUTOPIA label and microcredit in formats that are appropriate of the nature of the relationship between institution.

The EUTOPIA Label and the EUTOPIA Micro-credentials are valuable tools for recognising student efforts and achievement of learning outcomes within the EUTOPIA Connected Communities. The ultimate goal is for microcredits earned in one EUTOPIA institution to be transferable to learning pathways taken up in partner universities of the EUTOPIA alliance, having met the quality assurance requirements in place. This approach aligns with broader educational and workforce development strategies, ensuring that the skills and competencies developed are relevant.

[to be continued ☺ ...]

EUTOPIA Partner	Legal framework for the accreditation of study programmes	Microcredential framework
Babeş-Bolyai University (Romania)	Programme evaluation/accreditations required. The accreditation is valid for five years and must be renewed regularly. Programmes first need to receive a provisional authorisation that is granted by the Ministry and, two years after the graduation of the first cohort, programmes may apply for an accreditation.	A new procedure approved in July 2024 will enable credit awards for Blended Intensive Programmes and summer schools, requiring a standard form to describe the programme National regulation encompassing all forms of microcredentials is to be further defined.

Vrije University of Brussels (Belgium – Flemish Community)	Programme evaluation/accreditations required (only for new programmes) Programme accreditation is required for the delivery of new programmes or for programmes with a limited period of accreditation (the 'Codex Hoger Onderwijs' 2013).	Micro-credentials are defined within the institution's educational policies, including the "Regulations concerning curriculum design" and the "Policy Framework for micro-credentials," In Flanders micro-credentials can be between 1 and 20 ECTS and are funded when they are part of degree programmes but not when they are part of lifelong learning programmes.
Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy)	All new programmes require an accreditation by the national quality assurance agency (ANVUR). This is carried out in January for programmes that commence in the autumn of the same year. The length of study programme is three years. For medical and healthcare programmes, additional requirements are verified, and a mandatory site visit is conducted.	National legislation permits recognition of activities organised in collaboration with the university, but specific decisions are needed to recognise micro-credentials from other higher education institutions. The small volume of learning qualifying as micro-credential should normally be between 1 and 30 ECTS and the learning can concern knowledge, skills or responsibility and autonomy.²
CY Cergy Paris University (France)	The evaluation of study programme is carried out every five years, and it is overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education or other supervisory ministries. The evaluation of graduate-level (second-cycle) programmes is based on breaking down the provision into fields of study, and consists in evaluating the field and each study programme within it. This breakdown into fields is defined by the institution, at its own discretion, on the basis of its strategic, disciplinary or thematic strengths. Institutions are free to organise their study programmes by introducing training pathways which they may modify at their discretion during the course of the contract	In France, microcredentials are not yet part of the National Qualifications Framework and there are no official documents that address the issue of their development and their recognition within the educational system.
Dresden University of Technology (Germany)	Programme accreditation is required for Bachelor and Master degree programs of state or state-recognised universities in Germany. The accreditation is obligatory unless the institution has a valid system accreditation.	In Germany most developments are currently taking place in the area of continuing education. Within higher education, the most common use of micro credentials are part of certificate courses, i.e. short educational programmes that end with a certificate.
University of Gothenburg (Sweden)	All programmes are to subject to quality review. This is done partly through the HEIs having responsibility for the quality assurance of their own programmes and partly by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) evaluating a selection of study programmes at the first-, second- and third-cycle levels. The aim of programme evaluations is to monitor the programmes' outcomes and to contribute to the higher education institution's own quality improvements for the reviewed programmes.	In the Swedish higher education system, freestanding courses are micro-credentials, but this does not exclude other types of micro-credentials. What distinguishes a course from other micro-credentials is that they can be research-based and quality-assured according to accepted academic principles

² Source: Italian Referencing Report of the Qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework," adopted in 2023 by Ministerial Decree of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

		and values that are codified in the Swedish framework for higher education. Each microcredential needs to have a course syllabus and they are subject to a common set of regulations and supervisions.
University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)	All programmes where partner higher education institutions involved are (institutionally or at programme level) have to be accredited by EQAR-registered agencies (see Law on Higher Education, article 33.b and 33.c).	National regulation is however in a process to be defined
NOVA University Lisbon (Portugal)	Ex-ante and ex-post programme accreditation The accreditation of study programmes is mandatory, within a six-year cycle. The evaluation is carried out by the Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) agency. For new study programmes the Portuguese higher education institutions must request prior accreditation to A3ES.	In Portugal Microcredentials are included within the context of the national qualifications system and are also part with to the Recognition of Prior Learning. Microcredentials can take the form of training units of short duration and can be acquired and certified in a variety of learning contexts (formal, non-formal, and informal).
Pompeu Fabra University (Spain)	Ex-ante and Ex-post programme evaluation All recognised degree courses must undergo accreditation within six years of validation (or within six years of a previous accreditation), in the case of Bachelor's and doctoral/PhD degrees, and four years in the case of Master's degrees.	Microcredentials in Spain are meant for life-long learning schemes, are typically developed on demand, when enterprises or institutions require some type of reskilling or upskilling for their employees; and therefore are not the type of course which is fit for undergraduates. They involve a relatively short course of study, between 3 and 15 ECTSs. The accreditation of such micro-credentials currently demands a very long, cumbersome effort.
University of Warwick (United Kingdom - England)	External quality assurance is only applicable to some universities and colleges that require a review assessment to inform the regulatory decision taken by the Office for Students. University of Warwick has its own degree awarding power, being able to approve its own awards, and carry out its own programme level accreditation.	

Source: EQAR website complemented with further consultation of the Community of Practice for Connected Learning (CoP).

Discussion questions for the EQAF audience:

- What kind of decision-making is needed for accepting a label in your institution?
- What Information is required for the implementation of labels and procedures for micro-credentials (if any).
- What is the Impact of the quality assurance on curriculum reform (procedures and processes for micro and macro changes)?
- What are some examples of institutional QA processes for the award of micro-credentials in your higher education institution?
- Can you provide models of internal QA processes contributing to the recognition of micro-credits?

- *What is the role of existing Quality Assurance (QA) systems and processes in enhancing cooperation within European University Alliances?*
- *What are the possible implications of the EUTOPIA model for transferability of microcredits earned in one EUTOPIA institution to learning pathways in partner universities? Can this model be employed in your university?*