

Distinguishing Lifelong Learning, Micro-credentials, and Staff Development

Scope and Purpose

This document establishes a shared reference framework for the ENLIGHT Alliance in the field of lifelong learning. It reflects a common operational understanding developed for the purposes of the ENLIGHT project and its associated deliverables.

Lifelong learning is a broad and evolving concept, interpreted differently across national, institutional, and disciplinary contexts. This document does not seek to provide a universal or exhaustive definition, nor to replace existing institutional or national approaches.

Instead, it introduces a pragmatic and project-oriented distinction between lifelong learning, micro-credentials, and staff development, in order to support coordination, reporting, and implementation within ENLIGHT.

The application of this framework should therefore be understood in relation to ENLIGHT-specific activities and adapted, where necessary, to the respective national and institutional contexts.

1. Operational Context

This document aims to establish a shared conceptual and operational understanding within the ENLIGHT Alliance regarding the distinction between:

- Lifelong Learning (LLL) as a structured educational mission,
- Micro-credentials as certified learning outputs, and
- Staff Development as an internal capacity-building function.

The need for this clarification arises from observed conceptual misconception across alliance partners and activities, which risks diluting the strategic value of lifelong learning as defined in key European and international policy instruments addressing skills development, lifelong learning, and adult education. Those sources include the European Skills Agenda, the Council Recommendation on Micro-credentials, the emerging Union of Skills initiative, UNESCO's Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education, and the OECD Skills Strategy.

2. Policy Foundations

ENLIGHT's approach is not only conceptually grounded but also normatively aligned with evolving European frameworks for skills, qualifications, and lifelong learning systems. Thus, ENLIGHT aligns with the following principles:

- Lifelong learning is a continuous and structured process of learning across the lifespan, encompassing both voluntary and, where relevant, professionally required learning, and contributing to employability, active citizenship, and personal development. It includes both voluntary learning activities, often driven by personal and professional development goals, as well as required or mandatory forms of continuing professional development (CPD) linked to regulatory or professional obligations. Within this framework, ENLIGHT places particular emphasis on voluntary lifelong learning as a key dimension of individual motivation, flexibility, and learner-centered engagement.
- Micro-credentials are certified, assessed, and quality-assured learning outcomes, typically short, flexible, and stackable, and constitute one type of learning offer within the lifelong learning landscape.
- Universities play a central role in delivering accessible, inclusive, labor market-relevant, and societally relevant lifelong learning opportunities, particularly for adult learners and non-traditional students.

3. Core Distinction

3.1 Lifelong Learning (ENLIGHT Definition)

Within ENLIGHT, lifelong learning is understood as:

A structured, demand-driven, externally oriented educational provision designed for diverse learners beyond traditional degree-seeking students, leading to verifiable learning outcomes and, where applicable, certified recognition (e.g., micro-credentials, badges, certificates). This definition reflects a shift from input-based education models towards outcome-based and learner-centered approaches, as promoted in European qualifications and recognition frameworks.

Within European terminology, such provision corresponds primarily to non-formal learning offered by higher education institutions, distinct from formal degree education.

Key characteristics:

- **Target groups:** Adult learners, professionals, and non-traditional students.
- **Structured learning design:** Learning activities are intentionally designed, typically with defined learning outcomes and appropriate learning activities; in some professionally oriented contexts, the level of formalization (e.g. assessment or detailed learning outcomes) may vary.
- **Transparency and documentation:** Learning offers are described in a transparent manner, including relevant metadata (e.g. learning outcomes, workload, level, assessment, and awarding body) to ensure clarity and comparability.
- **Validation and recognition of learning:** Learning outcomes are, where appropriate, assessed and may be formally validated and recognized; however, in some professionally oriented learning contexts, assessment and formal validation may not be required.
- **Forms of recognition:** Recognition may take different forms, such as micro-credentials, certificates, badges, or the award of ECTS credits where applicable, as well as certificates of participation or attendance in cases where no formal assessment is required.
- **Relevance:** Learning provision is aligned, where appropriate, with societal needs and labor market demands.

3.2 Micro-credentials

Micro-credentials represent the preferred instrument for operationalizing lifelong learning within ENLIGHT, as they enable transparent recognition and facilitate comparability and transferability of learning across institutions. Where relevant, micro-credentials may be expressed in ECTS credits.

They ensure:

- Transparency
- Trust
- Transferability
- Stackability into larger qualifications

However, micro-credentials are not the sole form of recognition within lifelong learning, but part of a broader ecosystem of certified and validated learning opportunities.

In this document, micro-credentials are understood as certified learning outcomes resulting from structured learning activities, rather than the learning activities themselves. Where relevant, the term may refer to both the learning offer and its certified outcome; however, the distinction should remain conceptually clear.

Please, consult: [ENLIGHT 1_D55 - Modalities for ENLIGHT micro-credentials - PDF.pdf](#).

3.3 Staff Development (Distinct Domain)

Staff development is defined as an internal institutional function aimed at enhancing the competences of academic and administrative staff within the alliance

This includes:

- Staff weeks
- Training workshops
- Teaching and Learning conferences
- Internal capacity-building initiatives

Staff development may, in certain contexts, be considered part of lifelong learning in a broader sense, it is treated separately within ENLIGHT for reasons of target group, purpose, and project structure. Critical distinction:

- Staff development is mostly Non-formal and Informal Learning (Conceptual Clarification) not equivalent to lifelong learning provision
- It is inward-facing, institutionally oriented, and typically not formally certified for external recognition.

While staff development is primarily defined by its internal orientation and target group, it may in some cases take place in structured, outcome-oriented formats comparable to lifelong learning provision. In such instances, the distinction remains grounded in the primary purpose and institutional logic (internal capacity building versus external educational mission), rather than in format alone. Hybrid constellations may therefore emerge in practice; however, classification should remain anchored in the primary objective, target group, and recognition logic of the activity. This distinction is essential to avoid conceptual dilution and to ensure accurate reporting, funding alignment, and policy positioning at European level.

3.4 Non-formal and Informal Learning (Conceptual Clarification)

Within this framework, non-formal learning is included in lifelong learning, while informal learning is not. This approach reflects broader European discussions

emphasizing that while lifelong learning potentially encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning, recognized lifelong learning provision increasingly relies on organized and structured learning formats enabling transparency and recognition of learning outcomes. Consequently:

- **Non-formal learning** refers to structured learning activities taking place outside formal degree programmes, including continuing education, micro-credentials, and other organized learning offers provided by higher education institutions.
- **Informal learning** refers to unstructured, experiential learning that occurs through daily activities, professional experience, or self-directed learning, without predefined learning outcomes or formal assessment.

Within the ENLIGHT framework, lifelong learning primarily refers to **structured non-formal learning provision**, while recognizing informal learning as a complementary but distinct dimension. Those structured forms provide for:

- **Structured design:** The learning activity is intentionally organized and planned
- **Defined learning outcomes:** The expected knowledge, skills, or competences are clearly articulated
- **Assessment or validation:** Learning is assessed or otherwise validated in a transparent manner
- **Recognition:** The learning achievement is formally recognized (e.g. through a micro-credential, certificate, or badge)

Cf. Section 3.1

4. Strategic Position of ENLIGHT

ENLIGHT adopts a differentiated but complementary approach:

Domain	Purpose	Target Group	Recognition
Lifelong Learning	External educational mission	Adult learners, professionals, wider society	Micro-credentials, ECTS credits (where applicable), certificates, digital badges
Staff Development	Internal capacity building and institutional development	Academic and administrative staff	Institutional recognition (primarily internal and non-transferable)
Informal Learning	Personal and professional development	Open to all	No formal recognition or self-recognition

5. Operational Implications

To ensure coherence across the alliance:

1. Clear Labelling and Communication
 - a. Activities must be explicitly classified (LLL vs Staff Development) for the purposes of project implementation, reporting, and coordination within ENLIGHT
2. Quality Assurance
 - o "Lifelong learning initiatives should be clearly structured (e.g. with a defined purpose, target group, and expected outcomes) and subject to appropriate quality assurance processes at institutional level. Where relevant, they may be accredited or formally validated and linked to European frameworks (e.g. EQF, ECTS, micro-credentials). This supports transparency for learners and employers and ensures that different forms of certification can be used, not only micro-credentials
1. Recognition First Principle
 - a. Wherever feasible, lifelong learning should lead to a recognized outcome
 - b. Ensure consistency with evolving European policy frameworks
2. Target Group Differentiation
 - a. Avoid conflating internal staff activities with external educational provision
 - b. The distinction should be guided primarily by target group and purpose, rather than format alone
3. Data and Impact Tracking
 - o Where possible, lifelong learning initiatives should be monitored and evaluated within ENLIGHT using a gradually developing set of common indicators. This may include tracking participation, completion, and learner profiles, as well as, where feasible, selected outcomes such as skills development and relevance to professional practice. Data collection remains at an evolving stage across the alliance and should support project reporting, mutual learning between partners, and the gradual improvement of learning provision

6. Key Message

Lifelong learning is a broad concept encompassing multiple forms of learning across the lifespan. Within ENLIGHT, it is operationalized as structured non-formal educational

provision, which in most cases leads to recognized outcomes, and is distinct from staff development and informal learning experiences for the purposes of project implementation.

7. Conclusion

This framework provides a necessary conceptual clarity to:

- Support ENLIGHT's engagement with external stakeholders, including learners, employers, and society
- Ensure alignment with European policy developments
- Enhance the credibility and impact of its lifelong learning portfolio

References

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