



ARISTOTLE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF THESSALONIKI



## MINUTES OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION

### "Micro-credentials and Flexible Learning Pathways"

#### 1. Event Overview & Metadata

Parameter	Details
Event Name	1st Aristotle Innovation Forum - Aristotle Meets AI
Panel Topic	Micro-credentials and Flexible Learning Pathways: Standards, Certification, and Recognition
Date & Venue	Thursday, 21 May 2026   Ceremony Hall (Great Aula), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Panel Chair / Moderator	Professor Georgios Zarifis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Board Member of KEDIVIM AUTH)
Organisational Coordination	Ms. Elpida Vianni (Head of the Administrative Support Department, KEDIVIM AUTH)
Panel Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Ms. Elpida Vianni</b> (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki / EPICUR)</li><li>● <b>Professor Thrasyvoulos Tsiatsos</b> (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki / EPICUR)</li><li>● <b>Professor Laura Lopez de la Cruz</b> (University Pablo de Olavide, Seville, Spain)</li><li>● <b>Mr. Ioannis Michiotis</b> (Economic Chamber of Greece /</li></ul>

Parameter	Details
	CEN-CENELEC / ELOT) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Professor Larissa Jõgi</b> (Tallinn University, Estonia)</li> <li>● <b>Mr. Lazaros Pitkas</b> (Thessaloniki Chamber of Tradesmen - E.E.T.H.)</li> </ul>

## 2. Purpose & Framing of the Panel

The panel was conceived as a focused policy-and-practice conversation on micro-credentials and flexible learning pathways as emerging instruments for lifelong learning, reskilling, upskilling, and European educational mobility. Rather than treating micro-credentials in purely promotional terms, the discussion examined the conditions under which they can become credible, flexible, and socially meaningful learning arrangements across higher education, vocational education and training (VET), continuing professional development, adult learning, and labour-market-oriented learning. The ultimate objective is positioning micro-credentials within a wider architecture of lifelong learning that connects universities, employers, and public policy, while fully retaining academic credibility and public trust.

## 3. Agenda & Presentation Summaries

### Introductory Framing by the Moderator

#### Speaker: Professor Georgios Zarifis (Panel Chair / Moderator)

Professor Zarifis opened the panel by situating micro-credentials within the broader transformation of lifelong learning, higher education, vocational education and training, and labour-market-oriented learning in Europe. He noted that the current discussion on micro-credentials should not be treated as a narrow technical conversation about short courses, certificates, or digital badges. Rather, it concerns a deeper institutional and policy question: how universities, public authorities, employers, professional bodies, and adult learning providers can create more flexible, credible, and inclusive learning pathways without weakening the meaning of qualification, recognition, and educational quality.

He emphasised that micro-credentials have emerged at a time when learning biographies are becoming less linear. Individuals no longer move simply from education to employment and then remain within stable occupational trajectories. Instead, many adults repeatedly return to learning across the life course: to update knowledge, change professional direction, respond to technological shifts, recover from exclusion, strengthen their employability, or pursue personal and civic development. In this context, micro-credentials may offer an important response, provided that they are not reduced to a quick certification mechanism or a market-driven accumulation of small credentials.

Professor Zarifis underlined that the panel would therefore approach micro-credentials through several complementary perspectives:

1. The institutional role of university Centres for Education and Lifelong Learning in designing flexible but academically credible provision.
2. The European dimension, particularly the portability, transparency, and recognition of learning across institutions and countries.
3. Standards, certification, quality assurance, and public trust.
4. The labour-market perspective: whether micro-credentials can respond to real skills needs without reducing education to short-term employability.

5. The adult learner's perspective, asking how micro-credentials may support participation, progression, and meaningful learning for people whose educational and professional lives are complex, interrupted, or constantly changing.

He invited the speakers to move beyond promotional language and to address the critical conditions under which micro-credentials can become genuinely valuable: clear learning outcomes, credible assessment, quality assurance, recognition, stackability, inclusion, and responsiveness to both social and economic needs. He also stressed that micro-credentials should be seen as complementary to degrees, professional qualifications, continuing education, and adult learning — not as substitutes for them. The central question for the discussion, therefore, was not whether micro-credentials are fashionable or useful in abstract terms, but how they can be designed and governed so that they strengthen, rather than fragment, the wider ecology of lifelong learning.

### Presentation 1: Institutional Opening Perspective: Universities and Lifelong Learning Centres

Speaker: Ms. Elpida Vianni (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)

Ms. Vianni offered an institutional intervention on the strategic role of lifelong learning centres within Greek higher education, the enabling framework for non-formal provision, and the place of micro-credentials within a broader university lifelong learning mission:

- **Regulatory Mandate in Greece:** It was emphasized that Greek law explicitly requires every higher education institution to operate a dedicated Centre for Lifelong Learning (KEDIVIM). This positions lifelong learning as a core, legally-mandated university mission rather than a peripheral or auxiliary service.
- **Role of KEDIVIM Units:** These units act as the primary operational hubs designed to respond rapidly to societal demand and modern labor market shifts, offering flexible non-formal curricula that traditional degrees cannot accommodate.
- **Demographic Expansion & Strategy:** Taking AUTH's Lifelong Learning Centre (established in 2018) as a case study, she highlighted an exceptionally diverse target demographic, extending from researchers, postgraduates, and working professionals to unemployed individuals, and even primary/secondary school learners.
- **Strategic Shift:** AUTH is successfully utilizing ECTS credits for non-formal courses, moving deliberately towards fully integrating stackable micro-credentials. This transitions the institution from providing isolated courses to sustaining cohesive, recognized learning pathways and competencies.
- **European Synergy:** As Greece's largest multidisciplinary institution, AUTH leverages cross-disciplinary programmatic development to address transversal competencies (such as AI and the green transition). This aligns with the European Universities Alliance framework through EPICUR, targeting cross-institutional recognition and harmonized lifelong learning pathways.

### Presentation 2: Higher Education / EPICUR Perspective

Speaker: Professor Thrasyvoulos Tsiatsos (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki / EPICUR)

Professor Tsiatsos addressed the European higher education dimension of micro-credentials, with reference to flexible pathways, alliance-based cooperation, digitalisation, and emerging institutional models:

- **Complementary Role:** It was explicitly noted that micro-credentials are not intended to replace traditional university degrees. Instead, they answer the modern societal and market demand for continuous, flexible updates of knowledge, as rapid technological change now evolves much faster than traditional degree cycles.
- **EPICUR and Flexible European Pathways:** Within the framework of European Universities Alliances, and specifically drawing from the EPICUR experience, micro-credentials act as essential building blocks. They allow learners to dynamically participate in short educational opportunities across different universities and countries, forming a unified, borderless learning journey.
- **European Tools and Frameworks:** To achieve genuine mobility, credentials must be readable, understandable, and institutionally recognizable across borders. This directly connects micro-credentials to major European initiatives, including European Digital Credentials, the European Learning Model, and recognition frameworks aimed at the European Education Area.
- **The Risk of "Skills Tokens":** A warning was issued against fragmenting education into isolated "skills tokens" devoid of academic coherence. Legitimacy requires micro-credentials to remain anchored to clear learning outcomes, rigorous quality assurance, and meaningful learner progression.
- **The Interconnected Learning Ecosystem:** The future is defined as a hybrid model where learners move dynamically between formal, non-

formal, and lifelong learning experiences throughout their lives, shifting the paradigm of education away from a single, isolated life phase.

### Presentation 3: Institutional Design and Implementation Perspective

**Speaker: Professor Laura Lopez de la Cruz (University Pablo de Olavide, Seville, Spain)**

Professor Lopez de la Cruz addressed the design and implementation of micro-credentials at the institutional level, including governance, strategic embedding, and the operational framework for building flexible learning pathways based on the Andalusian model (2022–2026):

- **Structural Milestones (As of March 31, 2026):** The program boasts 244 distinct micro-credentials, 2,805 total enrolled students, and signed collaboration agreements with 155 external companies and institutions.

#### The 10-Step Operational Framework:

1. **Regulatory Framework:** Established a Lifelong Learning Regulation in 2022, formally revised in 2026 to add a specific legal section regulating university micro-credentials (under 15 ECTS, mapping to MECES levels 1–3).
2. **Creation of the Core Team:** Assembled a dedicated, multi-disciplinary administrative and academic management unit (IT engineers, economists, communication experts, corporate relations managers).
3. **Design of the Academic & Financial Approval Procedure:** Standardized digital templates for contents and budgets, technical vetting, and quality evaluation questionnaires overseen by an Evaluation Committee.
4. **Website Development:** Launched a web portal hosting the training catalog, corporate partnerships, and an online enrollment engine.
5. **Collaboration with External Stakeholders:** Formed an active co-design network with 155 companies and professional bodies to map directly to real-time labor market deficits.
6. **Dissemination Initiatives:** Executed internal awareness campaigns targeted at university faculties and external partnership marketing events.
7. **Implementation of Digital Certification (Europass):** Transitioned all micro-credentials to the standard Europass format since January 2025 for student portability and instant verification.
8. **Marketing & Branding Strategy:** Funded professional corporate identity design and digital marketing consultancy.
9. **Establishment of Strategic Areas:** Organized the catalog into 8 priority sectors (Digital/AI, Health/wellbeing, Economy/sustainability, Law/ADR, Business, Cultural industries, Urban planning/inclusion, and Education).
10. **Funded Student Programme:** Formed alliances with public foundations and financial entities in 2025 to offer dedicated funding and grants.

### Presentation 4: Standards, Certification, and Recognition Perspective

**Speaker: Mr. Ioannis Michiotis (Economic Chamber of Greece / CEN-CENELEC / ELOT)**

Mr. Michiotis addressed standards, certification environments, recognition mechanisms, and the economic-governance conditions under which micro-credentials may gain legitimacy, interoperability, and broader public trust:

- **The Paradigm of "Trust":** When discussing micro-credentials, the most important word is not "flexibility," but "trust." Short learning certifications are easy to create, but their real value depends on whether employers understand what they represent, which skills they certify, and how reliable the issuing institution is.
- **Risk of Market Fragmentation:** If an employer receives ten different certificates from ten different platforms, without common standards or transparent assessment methods, evaluating them is nearly impossible. This creates a high risk of systemic fragmentation, leading to an environment with many certifications but limited recognition.
- **Core Pillars of Standardization:** To maintain ecosystem integrity, explicit clarity and transparency are required across four major domains: what the learner has achieved, explicit learning outcomes, structured assessment methodologies, and the specific level of competencies certified. Certification must be rigidly supported by quality assurance mechanisms to create credentials with real educational and professional value.
- **Cross-Border Recognition:** In an international and digital labor market, micro-credentials must be universally readable and valued beyond a single company or national context—especially when validating digital skills or AI competencies. Universities and trusted public bodies have a critical role to play as guarantors of quality, transparency, and academic credibility. The key challenge is finding a balance: preserving quality without losing flexibility, and encouraging innovation without weakening credibility.

## Presentation 5: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Perspective

### Speaker: Professor Larissa Jõgi (Tallinn University, Estonia)

Professor Jõgi addressed adult education, lifelong learning, recognition, inclusion, and the role of micro-credentials in widening meaningful participation and supporting progression for diverse adult learners:

Professor Jõgi addressed the discussion from the standpoint of adult education, lifelong learning, and the lived learning biographies of adult learners. Her intervention shifted the focus from micro-credentials as institutional products to micro-credentials as possible moments within a longer, more complex adult learning pathway. She argued that, from an adult education perspective, the central question is not only what a micro-credential certifies, but how it enters the learner's life: what need it responds to, what transition it supports, what confidence it builds, and whether it opens or closes further opportunities.

Drawing on the experience of Tallinn University and its lifelong learning provision, she noted that universities increasingly work with adult learners who are not always degree-seeking students in the conventional sense. They may be professionals seeking renewal, adult educators reflecting on their practice, community workers, people moving between sectors, or learners whose earlier educational trajectories were interrupted. For these learners, shorter and more focused forms of learning can be meaningful, especially when they are academically serious, pedagogically supportive, and connected to wider pathways of personal, professional, and civic development.

At the same time, Professor Jõgi offered a critical caution. Micro-credentials should not be understood merely as fast responses to labour-market demand or tools to make universities more responsive to society. However, she insisted that flexibility must be accompanied by guidance, recognition, and pedagogical care. Adult learners need to understand how a short learning experience connects to their prior learning, their professional practice, and possible future progression.

Her contribution also drew attention to inclusion. Micro-credentials may widen participation if they lower unnecessary barriers, offer flexible entry points, and recognise the realities of working adults. Yet they may also become exclusionary if they are expensive, poorly explained, weakly recognised, or designed mainly for already advantaged learners who know how to navigate educational systems. For this reason, she argued that the social justice dimension of micro-credentials should remain central. The issue is not simply to produce more opportunities, but to ensure that the right adults can access them, understand them, complete them, and use them meaningfully.

Professor Jõgi concluded by suggesting that micro-credentials should be judged by the quality of the learning relationships and pathways they make possible. Their value lies not only in certification, but in whether they help adult learners move with greater confidence across life, work, community, and further learning. From this perspective, micro-credentials can become part of a humane lifelong learning architecture — but only if they remain connected to biography, reflection, recognition, and genuine learner progression.

## Presentation 6: Labour-Market / Chamber Perspective

### Speaker: Mr. Lazaros Pitkas (Thessaloniki Chamber of Tradesmen - E.E.T.H.)

Mr. Pitkas addressed skills relevance, employability, recognition, and the practical value of micro-credentials for trades, professions, and the wider labor market from the perspective of micro and small enterprises:

- **The Practical Demand for Skills:** For small business owners navigating rising operating costs, digital transitions, and personnel shortages, the key question is entirely practical: which knowledge and skills provide immediate and actionable value, enhance worker employability, and boost business competitiveness.
- **Quality Over Proliferation:** Micro-credentials provide an excellent response to market concerns, provided they are built upon high academic

standards and meaningful co-design with employers rather than repeating a flawed model where training is treated merely as a process for absorbing funding.

- **Strategic Proposals for Integration:** E.E.T.H. formally proposes five strategic pillars to maximize the utility of the institution:
  - The establishment of a permanent **Thessaloniki Skills Observatory** with the participation of AUTH, E.E.T.H., and productive stakeholders.
  - The co-design of micro-credentials based on real labour market data.
  - Rigid alignment with the National and European Qualifications Frameworks.
  - The strategic utilisation of resources from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).
  - The development of structured digital skills portfolios through Europass.
- **Chamber-University Synergy:** Reference was made to the **Memorandum of Cooperation** signed between E.E.T.H. and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (October 2025). This active alliance establishes joint initiatives, provides targeted vocational training through AUTH's Lifelong Learning Centre (KEDIVIM) to Chamber members, and supports E.E.T.H.'s strategic plan to establish a dedicated School for Professionals.

## 4. Moderated Panel Dialogue & Core Axes

Following the individual presentations, a moderated exchange took place around the core discussion axes of the session:

- Micro-credentials as complementary instruments within higher education and university lifelong learning strategies.
- Quality assurance, certification, standards, and portability across institutional and national settings to combat fragmentation.
- Flexible and stackable learning pathways, focusing on how short-form learning connects to broader qualifications and progression routes in late 2026.
- Access and inclusion, evaluating the value of micro-credentials for adult learners, working learners, career changers, and non-traditional participants.

## 5. Concluding Remarks by the Panel Chair

**Speaker: Professor Georgios Zarifis (Panel Chair / Moderator)**

"Micro-credentials sit at a demanding crossroads. They belong to lifelong learning because they respond to the need for learning across the life course. They belong to higher education because universities are increasingly asked to open their knowledge beyond traditional degree structures. They belong to vocational education and training because many of the most urgent learning needs are occupational, sectoral, and practical. They belong to labour-market policy because skills must be visible, recognisable, and usable. And they belong to public policy because flexibility without trust can easily become fragmentation.

So, the challenge before us is not simply to produce more micro-credentials. Europe does not need a new inflation of small certificates. What it needs is a trustworthy architecture of learning: short forms that are connected to serious standards; flexible pathways that do not abandon academic or professional depth; labour-market relevance that does not reduce education to immediate employability; and inclusion that reaches adult learners, working learners, career changers, and those who have historically been kept at the margins of formal educational opportunity.

In that sense, micro-credentials should not be treated as a substitute for degrees, qualifications, vocational formation, or broader educational development. Their strongest role is complementary: to make learning more responsive, more accessible, more transparent, and more connected. But they must remain anchored in quality assurance, recognition, public trust, and learner progression. Otherwise, we risk confusing movement with mobility, accumulation with learning, and certification with capability.

The task, therefore, is beautifully difficult: to build flexible learning pathways without turning education into fragments; to serve labour-market needs without surrendering educational purpose; and to make micro-credentials small enough to be accessible, but serious enough to matter."