Microcredentials for VET and labour market learning

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#microcredentials

Microcredentials a labour market megatrend
Microcredentials for VET and labour market learning

Three key objectives

- Mapping microcredentials in European LM-related education, training and learning
- Microcredentials and evolving qualifications systems
- Microcredentials and the added value for end-users

Cedefop’s Advisory Group on the study

Cedefop has embarked on the global discussion on microcredentials
Timeline of the project

- Official start: December 2020 (research at the time focused on HE)
- Conference on microcredentials: 25-26 November 2021 (Mapping exercise and case studies)
- EU council Recommendation: December 2021 (Cedefop's continuous support to SWD)
- Advisory Group meetings: 2021-23
- Continuous exchange at EU and international level: January 2022 – April 2023
- Three research reports
- One Briefing Note (forthcoming)
- One Podcast (forthcoming)
- International conference: June 2023
Conceptual background
Dimensions of qualifications systems

- Flexile, nimble qualifications and credentials
- Demand (labour market) driven
- Supply (education) driven
- Stable, dependable qualifications and credentials

Source: Cedefop 2010
Main conceptual elements of the study

We adopted a wider ‘dual’ perspective regarding qualifications

- ‘qualified’ in the sense of having obtained a formal qualification
- ‘qualified’ by virtue of having showed the ability to carry out a job effectively

Traditional vs modern qualifications: microcredentials have a number of overlapping functions with modern ones:

- promote lifelong learning
- enable alternative learning pathways
- are co-defined by stakeholders

The currency or value of microcredentials in the labour market and for further learning

- as a means of accessing and progressing within employment
- as a gateway to further learning
- in the form of social value.
Defining microcredentials
Where were we standing in 2021?

- **Uncertainty** linked to the **naming** and **function**
- **Diverse** landscape across EU countries - wide range of short learning activities
- Microcredentials’ is an **umbrella term**
- **Tight ‘Vs’ loose** definition: balance between fostering trust and flexibility
- **Digital transition** – Post-pandemic period
Novelty or old wine with new label?

- MCs are a phenomenon that is growing.
- MCs do not necessarily present a new form of recognition but a way to define better and standardise the already existing offers.
- Emerging mostly in areas such as ICT, engineering, manufacturing, and construction, but also in sectors such as hospitality, human health, and social work.
Focusing on sectoral and professional skills certificates

Can we consider them as microcredentials?

Adding an extra level of complexity…

Resemblance to microcredentials is most prominent when they are awarded upon the completion of an education and/or training programme (they check all the boxes to be labelled a microcredential, according to the European definition).

Given that not all microcredentials enjoy the same level of trust and quality assurance practices as sectoral and professional skills certificates, it is also possible to conceptualise them as a type of microcredentials that enjoys higher visibility, recognition and trust.

Sectoral and professional skills certificates can be either awarded upon completion of an organised learning activity followed by a form of assessment, or following solely on the completion of a performance-based assessment.

Depending on the national context, the answer differs.
Emerging questions!

- Can certificates awarded following solely the completion of a performance-based assessment be considered microcredentials?
- Should microcredentials be regulated, standardised, or formalised to mimic the nature of existing sectoral and professional skills certificates?
- Is there a need to ‘re-brand’ a well-functioning procedure that leads to a certificate that is well-accepted by the labour market?
Main characteristics of microcredentials

- MCs indicate the **title, the date of issue, the identity of the holder, the provider and achieved LOs.**
- **Online learning vs face-to-face** mode of delivery (classroom-based learning)
- More **diverse learners** than full qualifications, e.g. employees, new hires, individual learners, customers of a company
- MCs are mainly used by **adults in employment**, as continuing VET and supplements to full qualifications
- MCs address the limitation of formal QSs to **timely respond to labour market needs**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Title of microcredential</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Workload</th>
<th>Link to ECTS or ECVET specified</th>
<th>Mode of delivery</th>
<th>Learning outcomes specified</th>
<th>Prerequisites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Safety procedures in medical processes</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>12 modules, 17 days</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Quality management system and welding coordination</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>22.5 hours, 3 days</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>International Welding Engineer (IWE)</td>
<td>International (41 countries)</td>
<td>448 hours</td>
<td>ECVET</td>
<td>In person/blended</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>International Welding Practitioner (IWP)</td>
<td>International (41 countries)</td>
<td>156 hours</td>
<td>ECVET</td>
<td>In person/blended</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>3D printer operator for industrial applications</td>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>International Welding Engineer (IWE)</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>1 month (fulltime)</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Manufacturing VET Award in Process Manufacturing</td>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>125 hours</td>
<td>ECVET</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>International Welding Practitioner (IWP)</td>
<td>International (41 countries)</td>
<td>60-70 hours</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Online/blended</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Microcredentials often describe learning outcomes. The remaining either do not mention their LOs or present them in the form of content description.

Highly targeted/specialised types of training that are designed around specific occupational/professional profiles.

Focus on new and emerging topics and technologies.

Mode of delivery differs; it can be in-person training, online or blended.
Policy discussions at national level
Microcredentials discussion at national policy level

Policy discussions at an initial stage

- BE-FL – BE-FR –
- BU – CY- CZ –
- DK – FR – DE -
- EL

Advanced policy discussions

- NL – PL - SK

Legislation or draft regulations already introduced

- EE – IE – LV - ES

Indicative examples (2022)

Indications that system or broader policy developments ease the expansion of microcredentials
Key factors driving discussions relating MCs to qualification systems

- Upskilling and reskilling
- Labour market relevance
- Recognition of prior learning
- Trust and credibility
- Equal opportunities and wider access to a greater variety of learners
- Integration and progression within employment
Microcredentials as part of qualifications systems
MCs and qualifications systems

- A wide variety of microcredentials can fall outside of the formal qualifications system and operate solely in the labour market.

- Strong indications that microcredentials will not diminish the labour market value of recognised qualifications in the near future.

- Microcredentials can push qualifications systems to become more flexible, adaptable and responsive to labour market needs.

- Can microcredentials lead to fragmentation of knowledge?

- Too much modularity encourages early exits from training.
Linking modularisation to microcredentials

Modularisation is very common in adult learning; modules are often considered similar to microcredentials. Indicative examples: BE-FL, BE-FR, CZ, DK, HU,

In HR, the term ‘micro-qualification’ (‘mikrokvalifikacija’) was introduced in the 2021 Adult Education Act. Compiled units of learning outcomes (micro-qualifications) lead to short training programmes and/or qualifications at EQF/NQF levels 2-4.

In IE, the modular nature of the QS accommodates free-standing qualifications and qualifications as small as five credits; credentials smaller than this can be used as stepping stones into qualifications on the NFQ by being aggregated and used in recognition of prior learning.
Opening up qualifications frameworks to microcredentials

The NSK vocational qualifications could be considered a type of MCs, as they fit the European Commission’s definition of MCs.

The DKQF includes qualifications awarded outside formal education and training, including microcredentials.

Some MQF awards could be considered as a type of MCs.
Microcredentials and recognition of prior learning

Microcredentials as outcomes of the RPL process

Microcredentials, as a tool of RPL, can be used to

- obtain a partial qualification;
- obtain a full formal qualification (this also relates to accumulation/stackability of MCs);
- gain access to an education programme, including making the transition from VET to higher education;
- gain exemption from part(s) of an education programme and/or shorten its duration;
- gain exemption from part(s) of a professional qualification;
Barriers to a wider uptake of microcredentials

- Lack of **adequate and transparent QA standards**
- **Uncertainties** about nature of microcredentials
- The way **learning outcomes are assessed and documented**
- Lack of **formal recognition** of by national authorities
- **Incompatibility** of some microcredentials with NQ systems
- **Limited opportunities** for the accumulation and combination of microcredentials
The added value of microcredentials
Research questions (added value)

1. For end-users to trust microcredentials, which conditions must be met to ensure portability and transferability
   - information to be contained;
   - trust to be generated?

2. For individual learners to make use of microcredentials, what support can be envisaged?

3. How could microcredentials play a more targeted role in supporting ‘age-neutral’ systems for VET, strengthening the focus of up-skilling and re-skilling?
The nature of training

Training can both be **general** and **specific** in nature

- General training integrates **transversal skills** and **competences**, which can be of value for other companies as the individual changes jobs.
- Specific training has a **narrower scope**, and its value in terms of **portability** is typically more restricted.

The value of microcredentials is situated in this **tension**!
Tension I:
Is it a new skills currency?

End users perceptions (policy intentions) vs Reality
Tension II

Microcredentials shaped by both supply and demand side factors:

- The governance and configuration of national VET systems;
- The role of training in labour markets policies;
- The skills intensity and innovation dynamics in sectors of the economy;
- Enterprise organisation practices and skills utilisation.
Would you consider or have you already made use of microcredentials for training purposes?

- I have made use of microcredentials: 13%
- I am considering making use of microcredentials in the near future: 20%
- I do not consider using microcredentials for training purposes: 29%
- I am currently trying to find out how microcredentials could be of value to me: 38%

Source: Survey of stakeholders representing employees, students and adult learners and individuals who are currently unemployed (N=1180).
Have you experienced in practice that microcredentials helped you get promoted?

46% No

30% Yes

24% Do not know/cannot answer
## Microcredentials and added value for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Learners and employees</strong></th>
<th><strong>Employers</strong></th>
<th><strong>VET providers</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standing out in a recruitment situation.</td>
<td>More responsive training offer</td>
<td>Expanding the outreach of VET providers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour market mobility through vertical and horizontal skills pathways.</td>
<td>Faster and more efficient upskilling and reskilling of the workforce.</td>
<td>Consolidate strategies for VET excellence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved labour market outcomes in the form of income and career development.</td>
<td>Improve employee retention through improved job and career pathways in the company.</td>
<td>Allowing for new services and engagements with new targets groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career shifts.</td>
<td>Expanding the recruitment base (hidden workforce).</td>
<td>Involvement in local, regional and sectoral skills ecosystems building skills intelligence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to continuing and further learning on a flexible basis.</td>
<td>Reducing induction costs of new employees by providing more individualised and affordable training opportunities.</td>
<td>Building institutional capacity to innovate by e.g., co-designing new forms of provision to reach underprivileged target groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of prior learning.</td>
<td>Renewed competitiveness and innovation performance through concurrent strategies for upskilling and reskilling.</td>
<td>Improving quality of provision by engaging actively with stakeholders in local labour markets.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Cedefop (2023, forthcoming)*
A complex MC landscape: establishing trust - generating added value

Trust

Conditions for trust
- Credibility of MCs providers.
- Recognition.
- Accumulation/stackability
- Quality assurance.
- Assessment.
- Transparency.
- Knowledge of microcredentials.
- Content and relevance.
- Compliance with national regulatory frameworks.

Learners

Pre-engagement
- Stipulated rights to training.
- Active labour market policies.
- Funding formulas.
- National legislation for adult education.
- Personalised guidance.

Engagement
- Participation in skilling, reskilling, and/or upskilling activities.
- Engaging in lifelong learning.
- Admission into further education.
- Recognition of prior learning.

Added value
- Higher visibility of acquired knowledge and skills.
- Getting certified.
- Lowering study workload.
- Transition to labour market.
- Job and career development.
- Social returns.

Impact
- Enhanced employability and career mobility.
- Professional wellbeing.
- Economic returns.
- Civic engagement and health.
- Transition from hidden to valued workforce.

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Conditions for building trust

- Enabling factors
  - Metadata to allow for comparability
  - Quality assurance practices
  - Trusting microcredentials
  - Content and relevance underpinned by robust skills intelligence
  - Assessment practices
  - Quality of career and guidance and data about labour market and social outcomes

Credibility and reputation of providers

Source: Cedefop, (2023, forthcoming)
Ways to support engagement with microcredentials

- User-centred Career guidance and counselling
- Systemic and organisational support measures
- Funding continuing training

Source: Cedefop, (2023, forthcoming)
Examples of systemic support measures

Denmark:
- Danish Trade Union in finance -> options to introduce skills and performance-based standards

Finland:
- For two decades aim: skills development and utilisation
- WORK2030 development programme
- Finnish Innovation Fund : a visionary strategy process
Emerging questions!

- Could microcredentials become a selection mechanism that increases inequities? Is there a risk of qualifications unbundling?
- Does the provision still remain fragmented and disconnected?
- Are there sufficient user-centred services that could help learners and employers make informed decisions about learning options?
Vision for the future

Different scenarios: from a European MCs registry and opening up of NQFs to more incremental approaches based on metadata and easing comparability.

Both from a user and a system perspective each of these scenarios has advantages but also challenges given the diversity of provision.
Thank you

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Project page
Podcast
www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/podcasts/episode-6-microcredentials-are-they-here-stay

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