



# Microcredentials – the new black or The Emperor’s new clothes?

Interim findings from Cedefop project on Micro credentials for VET and labour market learning

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9 June 2022 - Cedefop Brussels Seminar with the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union



**CEDEFOP**

European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training

# Why a Cedefop-study on microcredentials?

- ❖ Recent research carried out on micro-credentials focus on **higher, academic education**.
- ❖ This overlooks the potential role of microcredentials in and for **vocational and professional education and training**.
- ❖ It overlooks the potential role of microcredentials outside formal education and training, **notably by companies and labour market sectors**.



09 ©Shutterstock/nattanan726

# Definition challenge

- ❑ No agreed definition existed at the beginning of study
- ❑ Key characteristics of MCs:
  - learning over a limited time period and/or in a specific area
  - may form part of or adding to formal qualifications
  - potentially 'stackable' over time
  - more flexible than traditional qualifications
  - frequently delivered in a digital form
- ❑ Is it a genuinely new form of recognition or not?



# Cedefop project: Microcredentials (2021-23)

**Three key objectives structured in three work assignments**

Mapping Micro-credentials in European LM related education, training and learning

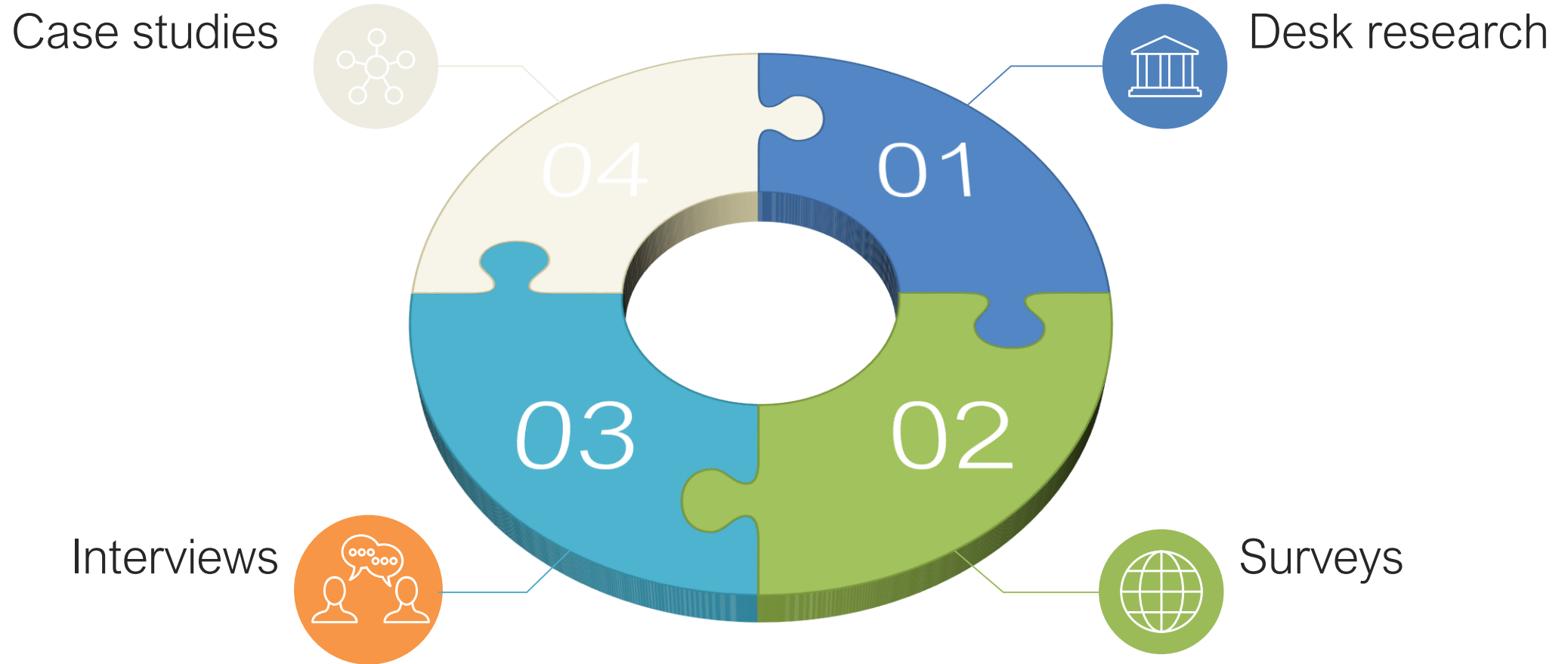
Microcredentials and evolving qualifications systems

Microcredentials and the added value for end users

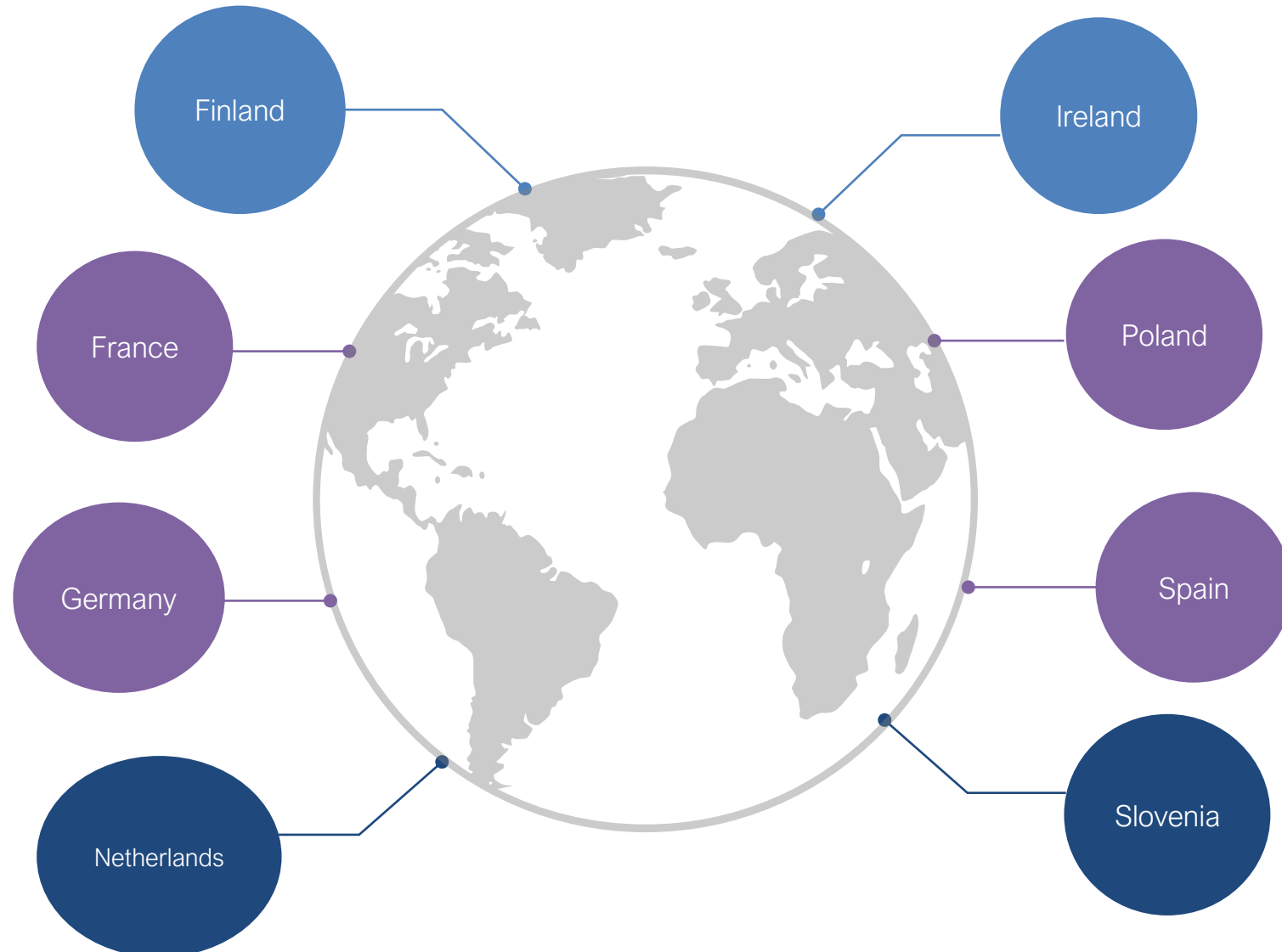
A wide-angle, panoramic photograph taken from an elevated position, looking down at a coastal city. The city features several large, multi-story buildings with classical architectural elements like arches and columns. The buildings are situated on a hillside overlooking a large, blue body of water. In the foreground, there is a paved plaza with some greenery and a few people. The sky is clear and blue. The image is framed by a curved, metallic railing, suggesting it was taken from a balcony or a similar structure.

**Presentation of methodological tools,  
interim findings**

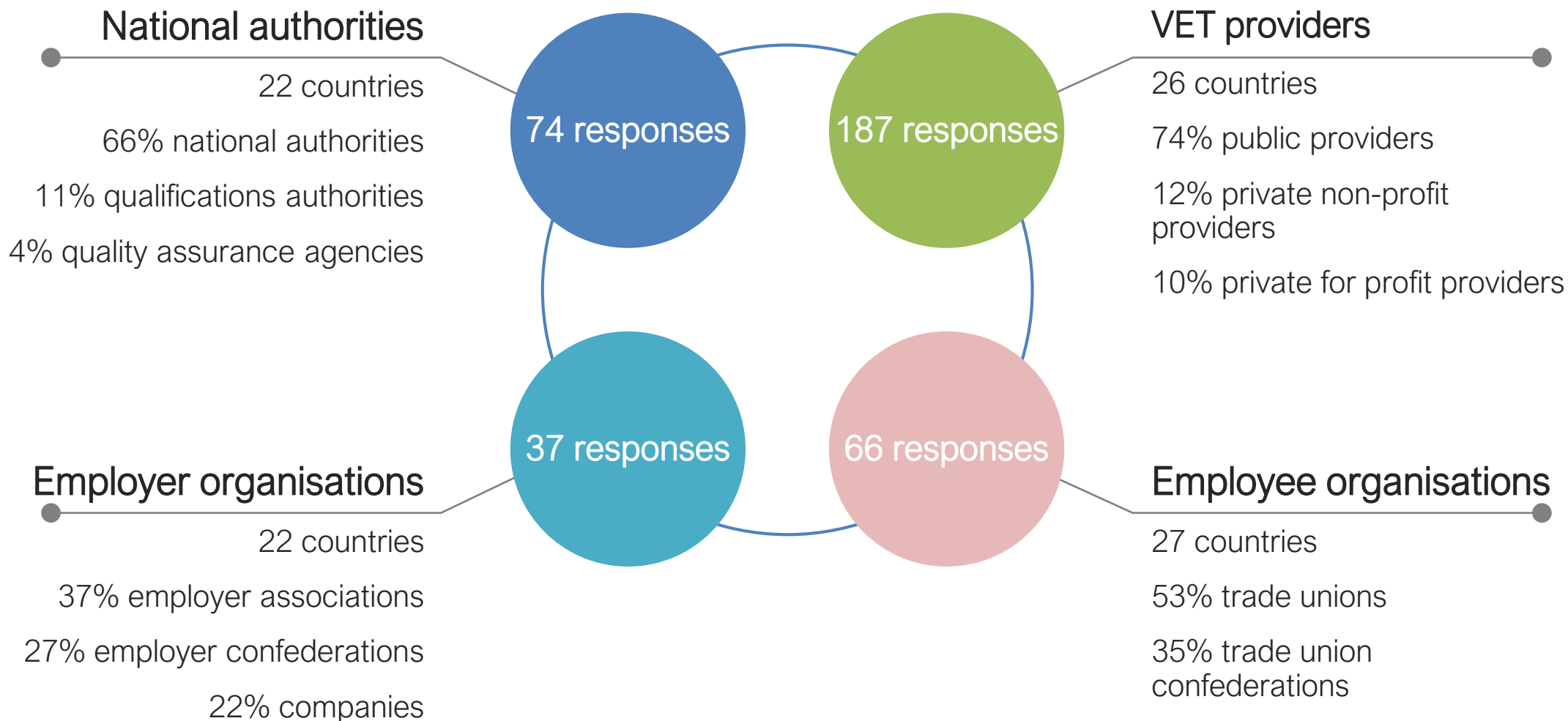
# Methodological tools used in the implementation of the project



# Case studies



# Surveys



A photograph of two young women in a classroom. One woman is sitting at a desk, looking at a book, while the other stands behind her, smiling. The background is a wall covered with various educational posters and diagrams.

## Understanding microcredentials

- **Uncertainty** linked to the **naming** and **function** of MCs
- Links between **modularisation** and **MCs**; certificates relating to parts of qualifications or modules are often associated with microcredentials.
- MCs are a **phenomenon that is growing**, covers constantly larger part of the policy agenda, linked to innovations in learning and usually addresses different needs of end users than traditional qualifications.
- Emerging mostly in areas such as **ICT, engineering, manufacturing, and construction**, but also in sectors such as **hospitality, human health, and social work**

# Microcredentials in a nutshell

“Microcredentials are evidence of practical, flexible, on-demand, and short learning experiences. This is what makes them so attractive. Common European standards must preserve this attractiveness and not limit it through over - regulation and - formalization. It is thus central to find an appropriate **balance between fostering trust and transparency** as part of a common approach without compromising the **flexibility** of microcredentials”

*Employers organisations survey, Germany*



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# MCs and policy context

1. Microcredentials have only **recently gained Europe-wide attention** in policy discussions.
2. In broad terms, there are **three** groups of countries when it comes to the extent that discussions on MCs have evolved:
  - ✓ policy discussions are at an **initial stage**;
  - ✓ **advanced policy discussions**, e.g. exploring the phenomenon in detail or aiming to include microcredentials in official documents;
  - ✓ **legislation or draft regulations** have been already introduced.
3. The term microcredential is **rarely included per se** in strategic, legal or official documents.
4. Some indications that system or broader policy developments **ease the expansion** of microcredentials.





## Which are the distinguishing features of micro-credentials?

- MCs indicate the **title, the date of issue, the identity of the holder, the provider and achieved LOs.**
- Traditional face-to-face mode (**classroom-based learning**) of delivery
- The **learning outcome-based** approach is often standard practice for both full qualifications and microcredentials
- Most commonly used assessment practice based on **assignments**
- Data shows some MCs can be **accumulated** and **combined** with Qfs

# Microcredentials in formal education, training and learning

Formal VET providers usually offer MCs on their own but also in partnership with other formally recognised providers and employers' organisations

Initial VET (perhaps with the exception of Ireland, reflecting its highly modularised qualifications system structure) has yet to embrace MCs

MCs are mainly used by adults in employment, as continuing VET and supplements to full qualifications

Formal VET providers mainly offer MCs in the areas of ICT, manufacturing, engineering, services, health and education.



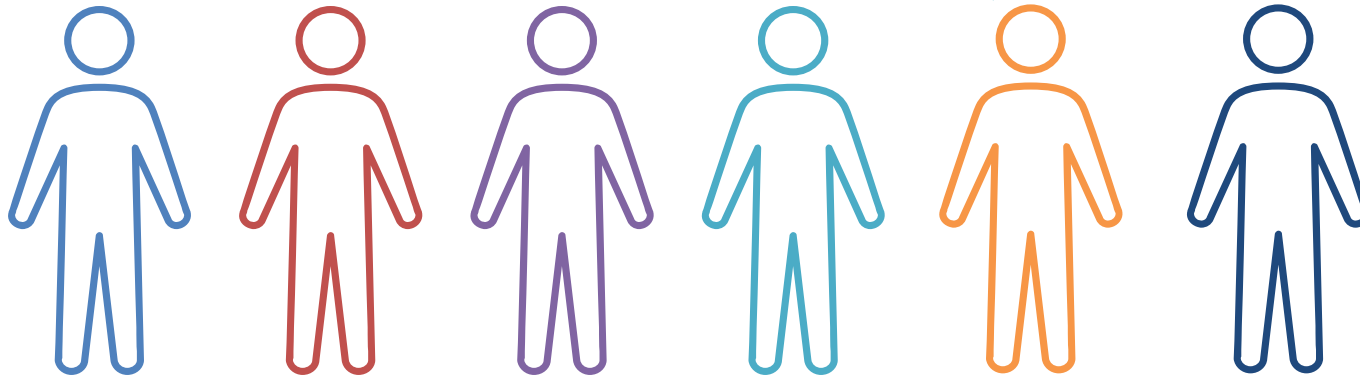
# Microcredentials outside formal education and training

Majority of countries have QS which partly prevent easy integration of MCs; this may indicate that MCs are expanding outside formal QFs

Labour market stakeholders mainly offer MCs in cooperation with formal VET providers

More diverse learners than those engaged with full qualifications, including employees, new hires, individual learners, customers of a company – a lot of sectoral activity

Non-formal MCs address the limitation of formal qualifications systems to timely respond to rapidly changing labour market needs





## MCs and qualification systems/frameworks

1. MCs do not necessarily present a new form of recognition but a way to **define better and standardise** the already existing offers.
2. Two main developments paving the way for the inclusion of MCs in NQFs are:
  - a. *modularisation of qualifications*
  - b. *opening up of NQFs to qualifications awarded **outside formal education and training.***
3. Majority of MCs that are attributed EQF or NQF levels are at **levels 2 to 5.**
4. MCs conceived as a tool for facilitating **RPL** towards the award of a larger qualification.
5. Lack of adequate **quality assurance** practices comes as one of the main hindering factors to the utilisation of microcredentials in RPL.

# Examples from case studies



**Finland:** The need driven by **skills gap**, mainly limited upskilling opportunities for adults and limited availability of short courses relevant to the labour market



**France:** The **concept is scarce**, whereas other related concepts are present (open-badges, block chains, block of competences, e-portfolio) - none of the few existing microcredentials – mainly in higher education – are in the National Qualifications Catalogue (RNCP)



**Germany:** Microcredentials play a **minor role** compared to vocational education qualifications and are seen as supplementary to the existing system



**Ireland:** The **term** microcredentials is **new**, but the qualifications authority (QQI) has been validating small volume courses and certifying the resulting learning with formal qualifications in the NFQ for many years

# Examples from case studies



**Netherlands:** The Dutch VET policy was revised during the last government period (2017-2021) to prioritise **flexibilisation of educational programmes** for job seekers and employed adults as well as create more opportunities for lifelong learning



**Poland:** Microcredentials are still perceived as a **relatively new phenomenon** in Poland. They are popular in sectors specializing in the development of IT technologies (software development, computer systems administration and IT management)



**Slovenia:** Microcredentials **can potentially play a role** in labour market-oriented education and training that relate to national strategic development priorities, which are defined in the Smart Specialisation strategy



**Spain:** Employment authorities are preparing a **reform** of non-formal non-accreditable training for employment addressed to employed and unemployed workers that **will consider micro-credentials**, linked to the Catalogue of Training Specialities managed by the national PES



ReferNet questionnaires 2021

# ReferNet deliverable 3b - Observation of change

Based on the existing documentation, can you observe changes

- (a) in the **qualifications/credentials landscape**;
- (b) focusing on **VET and labour market learning**;
- (c) zooming in on **2 sectors** related to the use of micro-credentials:

**information and communication technology (ICT)**  
and the **retail sector**?

And finally (d), based on the above, which are your overall **observations** and **recommendations**?



# Analysis of ReferNet replies I

26 replies received (still missing AT, IE)

## A. Changes in the qualifications/credentials landscape

- ✓ The term 'microcredential' is **relatively new** - not commonly used nor widespread nor has a univocal meaning. First exploratory steps towards the development of a clearly defined and delineated policy on the topic has been adopted in some countries
- ✓ Meaning depends on the **context** in which it is considered; circulating in a number of variations (micro-credential, micro-degree, micro-qualification, nano-degree, micro-master, badge ...)
- ✓ A way to prove one's competence and qualification

## B. Focusing on VET and labour market learning

- ✓ Use of credentials in **formal** and **non-formal** VET (vocational training courses, recognition of skills, but also the trainings within specific sectors)
- ✓ **Purposes:** easier recognition of skills, a shorter trajectory, flexibility (although this may require a great deal of agreement on mutual recognition) possibility to build up (stack) to a qualification may be more motivating.
- ✓ Principle of **recognition** and **mutual trust** between education and training providers necessary. Improvement in employer involvement is needed.

# Analysis of ReferNet replies II

## C. Zooming in on 2 sectors related to the use of micro-credentials: information and communication technology (ICT) and the retail sector

### ✓ Examples offered in ICT:

- Providers exist in both the **public and private** sector and a large number of **international companies** offer continuing training options on the respective software programmes. They promote their various trainings with an **industry-recognised proof**. There are also company-independent IT certificate providers such as those of the national industry association CompTIA and others.
- **International certifications** used: ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence), ICDL (International Certification of Digital Literacy), EIPASS certificates (in Italy: mainly used by teachers for individual training paid by the teacher card financed by the Ministry of Education).

### ✓ Examples in Retail sector:

- In LV, employees are being trained in vocational education and training institutions, universities of applied sciences and universities; supply of short-term training courses initiated by companies (for example: [MAXIMA](#) training centre, [IKI Academy](#).)
- In FI, the [Hygiene passport](#), is designed to promote food safety by mandating food industry workers to prove their knowledge of basic food safety issues. The Finnish Food Authority authorizes different organizations to provide training and examinations and to issue the hygiene passports (the hygiene passport has a significant role in the grocery retail sector as well as the [first aid certificate](#) and the [occupational safety card](#)).

# Strengths and weaknesses of microcredentials

## Strengths

Respond to the changing needs of the labour market

Assist in up-skilling and re-skilling

Promote lifelong learning

Enable learners to build and validate their professional skills  
(non-formal and informal learning)

Provide an opportunity for education providers to achieve  
better understanding and cooperation with employers

Have potential to provide access to education to a greater  
diversity of learners

Provide flexible learning pathways

## Weaknesses

Some stakeholders are still unsure about the benefits of  
microcredentials

Proliferation in unregulated microcredentials

Complexity and variety of microcredentials offerings brings  
confusion to users

Lack of transparency regarding who acts as guardian of quality

Recognition of microcredentials present some challenges

Microcredentials are often unable to reach the most  
vulnerable/disadvantaged learner groups

Source: Cedefop, 2022 (forthcoming)

# WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE MICROCREDENTIALS IMPORTANT?

They offer FLEXIBLE LEARNER-CENTERED Education+ Training

They give VISIBILITY and VALUE to Education+ TRAINING

PRACTICAL, ON-DEMAND EXPERIENCES

PROVIDE A WAY TO RECOGNISE SMALLER UNITS of Learning and Learning OUTCOMES achieved OUTSIDE Education Institutions

Helps to Re/up-skill EMPLOYEES and to ACCUMULATE LEARNING across INDUSTRY, sectors, platforms etc

DYNAMIC NATURE and BROAD DIMENSION

## MICROCREDENTIALS

can be a DOOR OPENER

Learning/ Adding NEW SKILLS

STIMULUS TO RETURN/ CONTINUE TO FORMAL EDUCATION

We want to ZOOM in on MCS PROFILE and CONTENT

to LOCATE the SPECIFIC, TARGETED NARROW RANGE OF SKILLS BEHIND SHORT-TERM LEARNING EXPERIENCES

BUILDING BLOCKS to FULL QUALIFICATIONS

GIVE VALUE to LEARNING and SKILLS

MCS ARE A TOOL

TO GIVE VISIBILITY to SKILLS LEARNING COMPETENCIES

TO ENCOURAGE LEARNING - ESPECIALLY

KEEPING IN MIND Continuous Motivational LEARNING for EMPLOYMENT in a FLEXIBLE and RELEVANT WAY



# LIFE LONG LEARNING

Their RELEVANCY and EFFICIENCY depends on How they INTERACT with OTHER TOOLS they need to be linked to a COMPETENCY SYSTEM

MicroCredentials can't be SEEN in ISOLATION from the SYSTEM

So... HOW DO THEY RELATE TO TRADITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?

Content QUALITY LEARNING OUTCOME

HOW DO WE SIGNAL

and how do we BALANCE them?

REGULATED ↔ FREE PUBLIC ← SPHERE → PRIVATE PRIOR ← LEARNING → NEW

MICROCREDENTIALS are there to COMPLEMENT other LEARNING OPTIONS

IS THIS SOMETHING NEW?

or just a way to DEFINE BETTER and STANDARDISE Existing OFFERS?

A WOLF in SHEEP'S Clothing, or...



the other WAY AROUND?

We need to ASK...

1. Who is it FOR?
2. What's hidden BEHIND? How do we UNPACK what MCS ARE?
3. How do we SUPPORT INFORMED ACCESS?
4. Why is it IMPORTANT?

## CEDEFOP'S

Microcredentials for LABOUR MARKET EDUCATION and TRAINING PROJECT

Jens Bjørnåvold, Anastasia Pouliva, EXPERTS, CEDEFOP

PRESENTED our INTERIM FINDINGS

UNCERTAINTY Naming and FUNCTION of Microcredentials + TENSION on how IDENTIFIED

MCS MOSTLY in AREAS: engineering, manufacturing, construction, social, hospitality + health

NEED for COMMON labelling and PRINCIPLES



MCS ROLE as BUILDING BLOCKS in REGIONAL NATIONAL+ INTERNATIONAL SKILLS STRATEGIES

Responding to GLOBAL DRIVERS

PEOPLE WANTED Fast changing LABOUR MARKETS

AGEING Populations

need for RESKILLING DIGITALISATION

# Thank you for your attention!

For further information:

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<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/microcredentials-labour-market-education-and-training>

