

# Microcredentials: a new upskilling trend

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‘Microcredentials are not objectives in themselves. They are tools.’ This was the key message highlighted at Cedefop’s conference on microcredentials last November. Over 200 participants joined the event, representing 40 countries in Europe and beyond, demonstrating that the topic of microcredentials and changing qualification landscapes is of global appeal and concern.

## WHY ARE MICROCREDENTIALS IMPORTANT?

Microcredentials arose as a result of the digital age and the rise of massive open online courses (MOOCs). They are a means of giving visibility and value to shorter learning courses and experiences, and are evidence of practical, flexible, on-demand and short learning experiences. Many see them as a way to recognise learning outcomes acquired outside education institutions (for example at work), while others see them as an integrated way to recognise smaller modules or units of formal education and training.

The conference focus was the presentation of the interim findings of Cedefop’s project on ‘Microcredentials for labour market education and training’. Cedefop experts Anastasia Poulidou and Jens Bjørnåvold presented the project and its outcomes. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on microcredentials’ broader uptake and function. Cedefop’s research is not taking place in isolation; it contributes to preparations for the forthcoming Council Recommendation on an EU approach to microcredentials.

Study interim findings show much uncertainty around the naming and function of microcredentials, with differing opinions on how they are being identified. In addition, microcredentials are emerging mostly in areas such as engineering, manufacturing and construction, as well as in sectors such as hospitality, human health and social work.

## MICROCREDENTIALS ARE TOOLS

The main question that triggered discussions during the two-day event was: what kind of tools are microcredentials? According to participants, they can be tools:

- for making visible learning, skills and competences acquired through learning;
- to give value to such learning, knowledge, skills and competences;
- to encourage learning and motivate individuals to develop in a lifelong and life-wide perspective.

## MICROCREDENTIALS: A DEFINITION

A microcredential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. The proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Microcredentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards (European Commission, 2020).



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Visibility, value and learner encouragement are key objectives to consider when reflecting on microcredentials. They cannot be seen in isolation from the systems or other tools as they are not free-standing instruments. They need to be understood as elements in a broader system of qualifications and credentials.

Another key question that emerged was: how do microcredentials interact with existing qualification systems? What is the relationship between this emerging phenomenon and traditional qualifications and credentials? Do microcredentials, apart from digital delivery, represent a genuinely new form of recognition? Or are they a way to define better and standardise the already existing offer? Although this question remains the key focus of the current Cedefop study, microcredentials cannot take the place of formal qualifications; rather, they complement the current conventional learning opportunities.

### MICROCREDENTIALS AT VARIOUS LEVELS

A broader perspective on microcredentials was discussed by a panel of international experts from the OECD, UNESCO and the European Training Foundation. They debated their global dimension as independent building blocks in national and international skills strategies.

Microcredentials are awarded by various stakeholders operating at different levels and institutional contexts. They are often initiated by local providers, but also by providers in the national and, to some extent, regional context. They are also increasingly viewed as independent building blocks in skills strategies responding to several drivers (such as

fast-changing labour market demands, digitalisation, ageing populations, the need for reskilling and upskilling). As they spread through different parts of education and training systems, and often in the non-formal or private sector, microcredentials might challenge the traditional national governance of qualifications and credentials systems.

Having common principles and common labelling for microcredentials is necessary as they are dynamic in nature and broad. They ‘tend to fly under the radar’, so using a ‘microscope’ could help zoom in on their profile and content; the specific, targeted and narrow range of skills that are behind short learning experiences. Considering that individual needs are very different, microcredentials can serve as ‘door openers’, addressing new and emerging skills or even serving as a stimulus to continue and/or go back to formal education, but can also be used as a tool ‘for excellence’ for particular target groups.

A key challenge in the coming years is to develop further Cedefop’s understanding of the links between vocational education and workplace requirements, and the role of microcredentials in supporting individual learners to accumulate learning across sectors, industries, borders and lifespans. ■

EU approach to  
microcredentials



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