Microcredentials – a new opportunity for lifelong learning?

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

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Why a Cedefop-study on microcredentials?

- Recent research carried out on micro-credentials focus on higher, academic education.

- This overlooks the role of microcredentials in and for vocational and professional education and training.

- It overlooks the role of microcredentials outside formal education and training, notably by companies and labour market sectors.
The challenge of defining Micro-credentials

- No agreed definition existed at the beginning of the study
- Existing definitions (from OECD, EU Commission etc..) point to **key characteristics** of microcredentials:
  - referring to 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, adding to individual learning careers
  - given their limited size and focus, more flexible than traditional qualifications
  - frequently delivered in a digital form

- Do they represent 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
Dimensions of qualifications systems

Flexile, nimble qualifications and credentials

Supply (education) driven

Stable, dependable qualifications and credentials

Demand (labour market) driven

Source: Cedefop 2010
Presentation of methodological tools, findings so far
Methodological tools used in the implementation of the project

- Case studies
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Desk research

01
03
04
02
Case studies

- Finland
- Ireland
- France
- Poland
- Germany
- Spain
- Netherlands
- Slovenia
Surveys

National authorities
- 22 countries
- 66% national authorities
- 11% qualifications authorities
- 4% quality assurance agencies
- 74 responses

VET providers
- 26 countries
- 74% public providers
- 12% private non-profit providers
- 10% private for profit providers
- 187 responses

Employer organisations
- 22 countries
- 37% employer associations
- 27% employer confederations
- 22% companies
- 37 responses

Employee organisations
- 27 countries
- 53% trade unions
- 35% trade union confederations
- 66 responses
Key findings from the survey programme

• **Uncertainty** linked to the **naming** and **function** of microcredentials;
• Emerging mostly in areas such as **ICT, engineering, manufacturing, and construction**, but also in sectors such as hospitality, human health, and social work;
• Clear benefits of microcredentials with regards to the **flexibility** and **responsiveness** to labour market needs;
• There also **needs to be a wider awareness** of microcredentials;
• **Quality assurance** of microcredentials is one of the most important aspects. However, **quality assurance processes differ** and not all MCs are quality assured based on the nationally established quality standards.
Purposes of microcredentials in national qualifications systems

- To help individuals to make their knowledge, skills and competences visible: 76.9%
- To assist transition to labour market for new graduates: 61.5%
- To better respond to the changing labour market needs: 92.3%
- To address the need for upskilling and reskilling of the workforce: 84.6%
- To address skills needs in emerging sectors of the economy where qualification a: 30.8%
- To sustain lifelong learning policies and motivate lifelong learning behaviour: 76.9%
- To address structural unemployment: 23.1%
- To sustain labour market policies and reforms: 15.4%
- Other - Write In (Required): 7.7%

Source: Survey of stakeholders representing national authorities
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
• Most commonly used assessment practice based on **assignments**
• The data shows some MCs solely awarded based on **attendance**
**How do micro-credentials fit in the labour market related education, training and learning?**

- Microcredentials refer to **shorter learning activities**.

- Employers are concerned with the speed that the formal qualifications systems can identify skills needs and adapt training offers accordingly. They want a training where:
  - content is developed with **input from the labour market**;
  - content is responsive to the emerging needs in a more **agile** way;
  - is **shorter**, includes **hands-on learning** and is **integrated in workplace**

- The main **providers** of micro-credentials in the **labour market** include large companies, industry associations, start-ups, online learning platforms, non-governmental organisations and international organisations.
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*
Findings from the interview programme

- MCs are not yet prominent in strategic policy documents. However, at national level there are initiatives and projects promoting MCs, as well as data collection and storage.

- Even though most microcredentials operating in the labour market are not part of the formal qualifications system, there is a lot of sectoral and company-level activity.

- The main purposes of microcredentials are employability, upskilling and reskilling, lifelong learning, adult education and inclusiveness.

- There needs to be a balance between flexibility and standardisation of education and training.
Case study findings

- A term ‘microcredential’ is not commonly used in national contexts; terms like ‘open badges’ or ‘small volume certificates’ indicate that the actual phenomenon is real, the term MC is still not accepted or recognised.

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

- Groups of learners engaged with MCs are more diverse than those engaged with full qualifications, including employees, new hires, individual learners, customers of a company.

- Initial VET (perhaps with the exception of Ireland and reflecting its highly modularised qualifications system structure) has yet to embrace MCs.
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:** Micro-credentials play a **minor role** compared to vocational education qualifications and are seen as supplementary to the existing system.

**Ireland:** The term micro-credentials 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 (December 2021)

The aim of this exercise was:

✓ To improve our understanding of the extent to which micro-credentials are known and used for VET and labour market purposes in the different countries;
✓ To provide an important contribution to the data collection carried out in the countries covered by the ongoing study.

The ReferNet data provides an important point for in-depth country research (a reality check)
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 ‘micro-credential’ is relatively new in the national education context, and it is not commonly used nor widespread nor has a univocal meaning.
- Its 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, possibility to build up (stack) to a qualification may be more motivating
- Principle of recognition and mutual trust between education and training providers necessary
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**.
  - **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 VET 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 hygiene passport has a significant role in the grocery retail sector as well as the **first aid certificate** and the **occupational safety card**).
D. Overall observations and recommendations

“For all short training and education courses or programmes that comply with characteristics of micro-credentials, the trust depends on the quality of the content as well as on the issuer and provider and market success.”

*Reply from Slovenia*

“Inclusion is a priority in the French Community but it cannot be achieved at any cost. The development of micro-credentials could generate strong competition between providers and constitute a real risk of marketisation of education/training. Member States must be given a seat in any discussions and decisions concerning the future development of micro-credentials.”

*Reply from Belgium French-speaking community*
Issues raised/concerns from MS

- Area of **conceptual conflict** in relation to holistic understanding of education and training and modularising MC approach
- Relation between MCs of **different education sectors**. Does the current approach of MC apply to all education sectors, i.e. vocational, general and higher education as well as continuing education?
- Role of **social partners**, funding, accreditation, certification and recognition standards
- Contradiction of learning outcomes approach and application of **input-criteria** time expressed by the terms “short” or “micro”.
- **Development of EQF**: developing from a qualifications framework into a credentials framework?
- Danger of **overregulation** and **bureaucratisation** of the continuing education market
• MCs ‘tend to fly under the radar’ so using a ‘microscope’ could help zoom in on the profile and content of microcredentials;
• Microcredentials are not objectives in themselves. They are tools:
  - Tools for making learning - and skills, competences acquired through learning- visible.
  - Tools to give value to the same learning, knowledge and skills, competences
  - Tools to encourage learning, motivate individuals to develop in a lifelog and life-wide perspective.
• They cannot be seen in isolation – not free-standing instruments;
• Microcredentials are awarded by a diversity of stakeholders operating at different levels and institutional contexts;
• Need to find an appropriate balance between fostering trust and transparency

More information and relevant documentation at the event’s webpage
Thank you

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