

Microcredentials: a labour market

megatrend



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A key policy challenge is to ensure that employers trust the value of microcredentials

The digital age has given rise to a wave of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and, with them, a freshly coined term: microcredentials. This relates to limited-length online courses that lead to specific sets of learning outcomes and skills. Microcredentials are increasing in number but face crucial challenges: overcoming their relatively unregulated nature to gain the trust of learners and employers and having their value as a potent tool of lifelong learning universally recognised. Cedefop has launched a project that will provide a better understanding of the

role played by microcredentials in supporting labour-market-related and employment-relevant education, training and learning. The Agency's Head of Department for VET Systems and Institutions, Loukas Zahilas, and expert Anastasia Poulou talked to *Skillset and match* about the intricacies of this labour market phenomenon and the specific aims of the new study.

The term 'microcredential' is novel but it may refer to long-standing practices, and that may add to confusion. Will you give us a clear definition?

AP: There is currently no single, agreed definition covering the

term 'microcredential'. Differences exist among stakeholders on what to count (and not to count) as a microcredential; in many cases, they are seen as a by-product of the proliferation of MOOCs. Generally, microcredentials are a way to give visibility and value to predominantly shorter learning courses and/or experiences. Some see them as a way to recognise learning outcomes acquired outside education institutions, for example at work, and others see them as integrated parts of formal education and as a way to recognise smaller chunks (modules or units) of formal education and training. Working definitions have been created by various bodies

pointing to key characteristics of microcredentials but, still, it is not clear from these definitions, whether they represent a genuinely new form of recognition apart from their digital delivery.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought microcredentials into the limelight. Does this signify a permanent shift as we move to more and more digitalisation of learning and work?

LZ: It is expected that economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis will be accompanied by increased short-learning options. The pandemic has also accelerated the trend towards increasing digitalisation of labour markets and the automation of production systems. With technological change moving fast, the 2020 European skills agenda has paid much attention to targeted policies that can support the upskilling and reskilling of EU citizens. The surge in interest in online learning is observed across Europe and globally, with a wide variety of public and private stakeholders providing short learning courses in response to the need for more flexible, learner-centred forms of provision of education and training for lifelong learning. However, it remains to be seen whether this will signify a permanent shift in online learning.

Is the unregulated nature of microcredential certifications a concern when it comes to their real labour market value? How could a framework be established that would inspire employer trust in such qualifications, similar to formal education?

AP: In order fully to understand the microcredential phenomenon, there is a need to understand how the technology-driven



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growth in microcredentials and online badges interacts with existing certification systems serving enterprises, sectors and technology areas. A key policy challenge is to ensure that employers trust the value of microcredentials. Their portability and transferability largely depends on their visibility and perceived value to others, notably to education institutions and employers. This is a key aspect of traditional qualifications and an important aspiration of microcredentials. If there is no agreed value, if there are doubts regarding the issuing body and/or the acquired outcomes, a credential will carry limited weight and value. The new Cedefop study will attempt not only to identify the conditions for trusting microcredentials, as seen from the end-user, but also the extent to which a systemic and strategic contextualisation of microcredentials is taking place and the implications of this.

So, what are the specific aims of the microcredentials Cedefop study?

LZ: The study will provide a better understanding of the role played by microcredentials

in supporting labour-market-related education, training and learning. Its findings will offer new knowledge of the characteristics of microcredentials, their added value to individual learners and employees, as well as their impact on existing qualifications and recognition systems. It will seek to answer several main questions: how widespread are microcredentials in labour-market-oriented vocational and professional education and training and which are their main characteristics and functions; how do microcredentials differ from existing labour market certificates and qualifications and what are their main strengths and weaknesses; and can microcredentials be sufficiently trusted by individual learners, employees and employers to become building blocks ('currencies') for lifelong and life-wide learning? ■

Microcredentials:
are they here to stay?



Cedefop project:
Microcredentials for labour
market education and training

