



Brussels, 10 June 2020

## **Note EQF AG – 53-5**

### **Note on a European approach to Micro-credentials**

#### **1. Introduction**

Micro-credentials are increasingly seen by a variety of policy makers and stakeholders as a new way of documenting and certifying skills. They are promoted as a way to encourage and facilitate alternative learning pathways that are shorter, more targeted and more flexible than those offered by traditional education and training. By providing recognition of a wide variety of learning experiences and outcomes (including from VET, higher education, adult learning, work experience and voluntary activities), micro-credentials are seen as building blocks for lifelong and life-wide learning, allowing individuals to accumulate learning outcomes over time and across institutions, sectors and borders. Micro-credentials potentially provide a way to address the gap between supply and demand for skills in a changing labour market.

According to the OECD,<sup>1</sup> it is the increasing demand for upskilling and reskilling and the reduction of costs made possible by digitalisation that led to a proliferation of short learning courses leading to micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are a statement of learning and can be issued in paper or digital format after a face-to-face, blended or digital mode of delivery or recognition of prior learning and experience.

Short learning courses leading to micro-credentials are gaining ground among learners and employers alike. Although very often associated to MOOCs and online learning, we see a diversification of providers: from schools to higher education institutions, NGOs, private sector, and VET providers. The extent of this offer triggers reflection on their value for both employability and further learning, and raises questions on quality assurance, recognition, transparency and portability between countries and sectors. The full potential of micro-credentials has yet to be fully unlocked. While rapid progress is being made in certain areas, notably higher education, the wider role of micro-credentials is less clear. And while technical

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<sup>1</sup> Kato, S., Galán-Muros, V., & Weko, T. (2020). The emergence of alternative credentials. Paris: OECD.

and digital progress support the introduction of micro-credentials, their quality and value cannot be taken for granted.

While micro-credentials might already play a role at national and international level, their ability to facilitate alternative (lifelong) learning paths still requires technical and digital solutions, and institutional quality assurance. A closer European cooperation on micro-credentials should support the needs of individual learners and employees, notably by ensuring transparency and trust and thereby facilitating mobility for learning and work.

The aim of the note is to inform the EQF AG on the current and forthcoming activities led by the European Commission on a European approach for micro-credentials and on the specific points of interest of those activities for the EQF AG. It also sets out a brief outline of what micro-credentials are and of their implications for skills, lifelong learning, and employability.

## **2. Why a European action on micro-credentials?**

Micro-credentials are rapidly developing across Europe and globally. A European action can support building trust in micro-credentials across Europe for their better use and recognition. Moreover, a common approach and definition can ensure transparency and quality of provision and recognition across the EU.

The growth in micro-credentials is triggered by a specific demand for flexible learning under the pressure of a rapidly changing society undergoing environmental, technological, and social transformations. The recovery from the Covid19 crisis, the ecological and the digital transitions will all entail a growing need for people to move from one sector to another, and as a consequence the need for just-in-time, short, and tailored training.

Micro-credentials can support workers in transition to acquire new skills and make sure their skills are well recognised in the labour market. For this, portability is a central and underexplored feature of micro-credentials. Portability implies that the learner is able to share and translate credentials from one context to another and to represent them in different combinations for different audiences.<sup>2</sup> Portability also implies that the micro-credentials are recognised across institutions, i.e. that their content is quality-assured and that their format is secure. This has consequences for learners' mobility across Member States and for a flexible model of learning pathways that alternates work experience and education /training in a lifelong and life-wide perspective.

## **3. Defining micro-credentials**

An increase in different forms of alternative credentials (badges, micro-credentials) points to a lack of a common and shared understanding of what these are, which could in turn result in difficulties for signalling value. While micro-credentials can be broadly understood as documented statements that acknowledge a person's learning outcomes related to a specific and targeted area, there is little consistency among the offers on the market called 'micro-

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<sup>2</sup> Barbaras, C. & Philipp, S., 2016. Transforming chaos into the promises and challenges of digital credentialing: Rossveldt Institute.

credentials'. There is a need to agree on a common definition at European level. This is why the Commission is launching consultation with a wide range of experts to come up with a common definition. In particular, the EQF AG can contribute to the discussion through their expertise in defining qualifications. The shared definition of a qualification within the EQF<sup>3</sup> covers a wide range of certificates, including those awarded by private sector and companies. While acknowledging the differences between micro-credentials and full qualifications, the work done through the EQF can support a discussion on how micro-credentials relate to the wider certification landscape and can contribute to addressing several of the open issues that are raised with the uptake of micro-credentials. The first phase of discussion is underway in the consultation group on micro-credentials in the higher education sector (see section 5 below).

Although there is no agreed definition yet, there are a few characteristics identified by experts as common to most micro-credentials. They are not recognised as standalone qualifications. They have however value in their own right as a certificate or recognition of achievement of learning outcomes in a discreet area. They are quality assured and recognised for further learning and employability. Moreover, they can be stackable, i.e. combined in different forms to obtain a larger credential or qualification. Stackability includes the opportunity to combine micro-credentials offered by different organisations, institutions, domains and potentially exemplifies flexible and tailored learning paths.

There are several open issues that relate to a shared understanding of micro credentials. A central one in the debate relates to the volume to be attributed to the micro-credential. A standardised unit of measure is seen as necessary for the portability, recognition, and stackability of micro-credentials. The uptake and accumulation of micro-credentials into larger credentials hinge on learning outcomes being understood and comparable in a transparent way, which can be enabled by qualifications frameworks.

#### **4. Role of EU tools in support of micro-credentials**

EU transparency tools in the area of qualifications and skills play a key role in the documentation and recognition of micro-credentials within and across borders. These tools relate to the transparency of qualifications (EQF), lifelong learning and career management (Europass), quality assurance and credits for achieved learning.

In particular, the EQF can:

- be a reference point for portability in determining the proficiency level of micro-credentials;
- support a more granular definition of micro-credentials that is based on learning outcomes;

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<sup>3</sup> " 'Qualification' means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards" EQF Recommendation, Annex 1 (a)

- support the quality assurance of credits linked to micro-credentials.

The discussion among EQF AG members can provide added value to the work on micro-credentials. Some national frameworks have recently “opened up” to include alternative or partial qualifications. If micro-credentials are referenced in a national framework, a discussion of the EQF AG could support the portability and stackability of the credentials for mobility purposes.

Micro-credentials have also common ground with the work of the AG on credit transfer, learning outcomes, certificates and qualifications, and validation. One of the lessons learnt as outlined in the upcoming Staff Working Document on the evaluation of the 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is that validation should take advantage of innovative practices in skills recognition, such as micro-credentials. In particular, portability is an aspect that has common ground with validation arrangement, as it is centred on the certification of specific learning outcomes and their recognition across sectors.

Other work led by the European Commission that is aligned to the micro-credential initiative includes the new Europass, which facilitates the issuing and storage of all forms of learning achievements, including micro-credentials in a digital format. Work is ongoing on the development of the Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI). The EDCI will support authentication services for any digital documents or representations of information on skills and qualifications as outlined in Article 4 (6) of the Europass Decision. As a digital file, these credentials can include a wide range of valuable information that can help the recognition and understanding of the credential by employers and other institutions. Europass Digital Credentials support instant verification; recipients can automatically verify information such as the identity of the awarding body or the quality assurance of a qualification.

The development of micro-credentials can be informed by labour market skills intelligence, such as the Cedefop Skills OVATE real time big data analysis of job vacancies, or more in-depth analysis through graduate tracking.

## **5. Ongoing and forthcoming activities on micro-credentials**

The European approach to micro-credentials is a joint initiative between DG EMPL and DG EAC, aiming to build trust in micro-credentials across Europe’s labour markets and for lifelong learning. The aim is a holistic European micro-credentials approach that works for all sectors. The process will consist of two main aspects:

- a) Studies to review the evidence on the uses of and main issues related to micro-credentials (including through the collection of results from EU funded projects);
- b) Experts’ consultations and stakeholders’ dialogue with the aim to reach an agreement on a common approach to micro-credentials that would ensure the take-up, validation and recognition of micro-credentials.

A series of consultations will be organised in order to map the ground and collect the issues at stake in different education and training sectors. These include:

- *Consultation group on micro-credentials in the higher education sector*: upon initiative of Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, an expert group was set up with representatives from higher education. The work of the consultation group, while focusing on higher education, will take a holistic approach and feed into work on all forms of micro-credentials. Timeline of meetings: 26 May, 30 June, 16 September.
- *Consultation with the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training*: a point on micro-credentials will be discussed in the meeting with a focus on the relevance and uptake of micro-credentials in VET. Date: 10 June.
- *Consultation with the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group* (for which this note is written) with a focus on recognition and portability. Date: 17 June.
- *Ad hoc consultations with experts*: thematic webinars will be organised with labour market and education and training experts, including social partners, to discuss experience and expectations of the uptake of micro-credentials. Timeline: June to September.
- *Consultations with PES representatives*: Representatives from PES will be consulted on the possible uptake of micro-credentials. Timeline: September 2020.
- *Consultations with VET and adult education sectors*: a point on micro-credentials will be discussed during an upcoming meeting of national coordinators for adult learning. As a follow up to the discussion with the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training, representatives from the VET sectors will be further consulted. Timeline: Autumn 2020.
- *Consultations with recognition authorities*: NARICs will be invited to discuss how micro-credentials relate to qualifications. Timeline: Autumn 2020.

The EQF AG is invited to comment on this note and reflect on the following questions:

- How do you, in your national context, see the role of micro credentials?
- Is the NQF in your country open for micro-credentials? If yes, how are they referenced? If not, has any discussion on micro-credentials started in relation to the NQF in your country?
- What are the main challenges you see in opening up NQFs for micro-credentials?
- What can be done at EU level to support quality and trust in micro-credentials?
- What would be the implications of a European standard or common approach to micro credentials to your work at national level and as members of the EQF AG?