Microcredentials: are they here to stay?

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

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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
Which are the distinguishing features of micro-credentials?

- MCs most often 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 a popular teaching mode
- The **learning outcome-based** approach is often standard practice for both full qualifications and microcredentials
- Assessment usually is an in-house process, but also undertaken by independent assessors.
- Data shows some MCs can be **accumulated** and **combined** with Qfs
Research questions (links to qualification systems)

1. Which are the **objectives** and roles, if any, of microcredentials in national qualifications and credentials systems?

2. How are micro-credentials, as identified in WA 1, linked to and integrated in the overall qualifications and credentials systems?

3. What **impact** are microcredentials having on the overall balance of qualifications and credentials systems?
Two main conceptual elements

- We adopted a **wider** ‘dual’ perspective regarding qualifications
  - ‘qualified’ in the sense of having obtained a formal qualification
  - ‘qualified’ by virtue of having showed the ability to carry out a job effectively

- **Traditional vs modern** qualifications: microcredentials have a number of overlapping functions with modern ones:
  - promote lifelong learning
  - enable alternative learning pathways
  - provide different options for progression
  - facilitate the partial recognition and validation of prior learning
  - are defined by stakeholders
Main key findings

➢ Microcredentials operate both *within* and *outside* formal qualifications systems

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

➢ Defining MCs: balance between fostering *trust and transparency* and preserving *flexibility*

➢ Strong indications that microcredentials will not diminish the labour market value of recognised qualifications in the near future

➢ Microcredentials can lead to *fragmentation of knowledge*
MCs and qualification systems/frameworks

- Policy discussion and developments on MCs:
  - policy discussions are at an initial stage;
  - advanced policy discussions;
  - legislation or draft regulations already introduced.

- Two main developments paving the way for the inclusion of MCs in NQFs are:
  - modularisation of qualifications (WA1)
  - opening up of NQFs to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training.

- Majority of MCs that are attributed EQF or NQF levels are at levels 2 to 5.

- MCs conceived as a tool for facilitating RPL towards the award of a larger qualification.
Microcredentials discussion at national policy level

Policy discussions at an initial stage

Advanced policy discussions
NL – PL – SK

Legislation or draft regulations already introduced
EE – IE – LV – ES

Indicative examples of countries
Key factors driving discussions relating MCs to qualification systems

- Upskilling and reskilling
- Labour market relevance
- Recognition of prior learning
- Trust and credibility
- Equal opportunities and wider access to a greater variety of learners
- Progression within employment
Focusing on sectoral and professional skills certificates

Can we consider them as microcredentials?

Adding an extra level of complexity...

Resemblance to microcredentials prominent when awarded upon the completion of an education and/or training programme

Not all microcredentials enjoy the same level of trust and quality assurance practices as sectoral and professional skills certificates, so possible to conceptualise them as a type of microcredentials that enjoys higher visibility, recognition and trust.

Sectoral and professional skills certificates can be either awarded upon completion of an organised learning activity followed by a form of assessment, or following solely on the completion of a performance-based assessment.
Emerging questions!

❖ Can certificates awarded following solely the completion of a performance-based assessment be considered microcredentials?
❖ Should microcredentials be regulated, standardised, or formalised to mimic the nature of existing sectoral and professional skills certificates?
❖ Is there a need to ‘re-brand’ a well-functioning procedure that leads to a certificate that is well-accepted by the labour market?
Main characteristics of microcredentials in the manufacturing and retail sectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Title of microcredential</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Workload</th>
<th>Link to ECTS or ECVET specified</th>
<th>Mode of delivery</th>
<th>Learning outcomes specified</th>
<th>Prerequisites required</th>
<th>Learning outcomes presented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Safety procedures in medical processes</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>12 modules, 17 days</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Quality management system and welding coordination</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>22.5 hours, 3 days</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>International Welding Engineer (IWE)</td>
<td>International (41 countries)</td>
<td>448 hours</td>
<td>ECVET</td>
<td>In person/blended</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>International Welding Practitioner (IWP)</td>
<td>International (41 countries)</td>
<td>458 hours</td>
<td>ECVET</td>
<td>In person/blended</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Qualification in Additive Manufacturing</td>
<td>Germany, France, Italy, Spain, UK, Portugal and Turkey.</td>
<td>60-70 hours</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>Online/blended</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>CNC Specialist Certificate</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>1 month (fulltime)</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>VET Award in Process Manufacturing</td>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>125 hours</td>
<td>ECVET</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>3D printer operator for industrial applications</td>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>448 hours</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Highly targeted/specialised types of training that are designed around specific occupational/professional profiles**

**Focus on new and emerging topics and technologies**

**Mode of delivery differs; it can be in-person training, online or blended.**

23 out of the 39 mapped microcredentials explicitly describe their learning outcomes. The remaining either do not mention their LOs or present them in the form of content description.
Modularisation common in adult learning; modules are often considered similar to microcredentials. Indicative examples: BE-FL, BE-FR, CZ, DK, HU,

In HR, the term ‘micro-qualification’ (‘mikrokvalifikacija’) was introduced in the 2021. Compiled units of learning outcomes (micro-qualifications) lead to short training programmes and/or qualifications at EQF/NQF levels 2-4.

In IE, the modular nature of the QS accommodates free-standing qualifications and qualifications as small as five credits; credentials smaller than this can be used as stepping stones into qualifications on the NFQ by being aggregated and used in recognition of prior learning.

In ES, the new system of formal vocational training spans from micro-training to degrees and specialisation courses, based on learning progression. Micro-training modules are partial and cumulative, and lead to a partial accreditation of competence.
Microcredentials and recognition of prior learning

✓ Microcredentials as outcomes of the RPL process

✓ Microcredentials, as a tool of RPL, can be used to:

✓ obtain a partial qualification (e.g., as in CY, DE, IE, NL and ES);
✓ obtain a full formal qualification (this also relates to accumulation/stackability of MCs) (e.g., as in EE, IE, LUX and NO);
✓ gain access to an education programme, including making the transition from VET to higher education (e.g., as in BE-FR and IE);
✓ gain exemption from part(s) of an education programme and/or shorten its duration (e.g., as in Belgium-FL, DK and ES);
✓ gain exemption from part(s) of a professional qualification (e.g. as in BE-FL and FR);
Stackability of microcredentials
Stacking microcredentials

✓ Microcredentials using ECVET do **not always** allow accumulation and stacking and are not always linked to EQF/NQF levels.

✓ In **Spain**, microcredentials can be stacked and lead to a formal VET certificate under its new Organic Law for the Ordination and Integration of VET.

✓ **Latvia’s** new law also allows microcredentials to be accumulated towards a full qualification or to be used as stand-alone qualifications.
Challenges and opportunities that microcredentials bring to national qualification systems

Opportunities:

- Making learning more flexible, adaptable and relevant
- Providing better lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities
- Better responding to the needs of the labour market and individuals

Challenges:

- Oversupply of microcredentials can cause devaluation and confuse stakeholders
- Microcredentials that are part of the formal system need to adhere to the same standards
- Shifting the preference for short-duration learning over full qualifications

Source: Cedefop 2022 (forthcoming)
Industry or professional certifications

✓ Finland: the hygiene passport, a microcredential already in use in the country's education system, is designed to promote food safety by mandating food industry workers to prove their knowledge of basic

✓ French digital service provider Groupe Orange, offers online courses on themes related to social responsibility and technology, such as support for a sustainable economy, digital equality, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity

✓ The German social startup Kiron Open Higher Education provides online courses for refugees worldwide using MOOCs; aim to bring them to a point where they can enter the labour market, a university or the VET system

✓ In Latvia, supply of short-term training courses initiated by companies (for example: MAXIMA training centre, IKI Academy)

✓ Vendor certifications, some of which have set industry-specific competence standards, for example in ICT, are being integrated into vocational and university qualifications.

Added value of microcredentials for end users
Research questions (added value)

1. For end-users to trust micro-credentials, which conditions must be met to ensure portability and transferability:
   - information to be contained;
   - trust to be generated?
2. For individual learners to make use of micro-credentials, what support can be envisaged?
3. How could micro-credentials play a more targeted role in supporting ‘age-neutral’ systems for VET, strengthening the focus of up-skilling and re-skilling?
## Microcredentials and the added value for end users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners and employees</th>
<th>Employers</th>
<th>VET providers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage further education and degree completion.</td>
<td>Provide access to education and training that meets the changing and emerging needs of companies.</td>
<td>Incentivise VET institutions to take a proactive role as talent brokers and skills advocates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide gainful employment and economic mobility and value.</td>
<td>Address talent shortages and skills gaps.</td>
<td>Encourage VET providers to consider the needs of employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise the income and opportunities of employees.</td>
<td>Provide access to cheaper and faster upskilling and reskilling of the workforce.</td>
<td>Help make skills more visible to students and employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve employment prospects.</td>
<td>Improve employee retention.</td>
<td>Provide a solution to the worker shortage and skills gap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide flexible learning modules for lifelong learning.</td>
<td>Train employees with specialised in-depth knowledge to successfully adapt to changing technological and business needs.</td>
<td>Reach underprivileged people, those who could not be reached with traditional programmes (e.g., homeless, refugees).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide access to quicker and more flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities.</td>
<td>Rapid acquisition of specific knowledge and skills required by the specific workplace.</td>
<td>Widen education offer and address equity gaps in VET.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide access to occupational and transversal skills through lifelong learning opportunities.</td>
<td>Make learning flexible and personalised.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cedefop (forthcoming)
What would influence a wider uptake of MCs by employees?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors for wider uptake</th>
<th>% Of total Responses</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of microcredentials to employees' career goals</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of microcredentials across sectors and borders</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of microcredentials in the training and continuous professional development programme at the workplace</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from employers to seek microcredentials (e.g., free time, covering the costs)</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cedefop (forthcoming)
Examples of why/how MCs are trusted in different local contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>High trust amongst learners reflected in the competition for admission to the microcredentials offered by Estonian universities. A quality assurance system is planned to raise trust in MCs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Up-skilling courses and VET modules addressing a particular competence (both leading to certificates) are widely used and well-trusted. This is due to a well-functioning national QA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Microcredentials are widely trusted by employers and learners. Still, not trusted by the state education and training providers: due to lack of understanding, governing regulations, and clear quality assurance standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Microcredentials accredited and included in the NQF are the ones most-trusted. For the rest, the trust depends on the perceived quality of content and training provider.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank you for your attention!

For further information:
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