EQAVET PLA: 'Quality Assurance of micro-credentials in VET' (8-9 November 2022)

> The PLA was implemented in a virtual format, using the MS Teams platform.
>
> 70 participants[1] attended, representing the following 28 countries[22]: Austria (AT), Albania (AL), Armenia (AM), Belgium (BE), Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Israel (IL), Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Malta (MT), Moldova (MD), Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Serbia (RS), Slovakia (SK), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES), Tunisia (TN) and Turkey (TR)

Flash Report

The labour market has rapidly changed in recent years, with the emergence of automation, green and digital skills as well as developments in demography and climate change. The COVID-19 crisis has impacted the labour market and emphasised the need for up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities. As a result, short courses with low volume of learning, such as micro-credentials, have emerged as a way of learners and workers to update or reskill as the labour market requires. Despite their increasing use, these learning opportunities do not have common standards to ensure the quality, transparency, cross-border comparability and transferability, which can undermine their understanding and value.

The Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 recommends Member States to apply a common definition, EU standards and principles for designing and issuing micro-credentials. The Recommendation stresses the need for quality assurance to be in place, in line with EQAVET, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET, as appropriate.

Part 1: Introduction to micro-credentials

During the first part of the meeting, the European Commission presented the key features of the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. The Recommendation[3] states that:

"A micro-credential means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity."

The Recommendation also includes standard elements to describe a micro-credential, which includes learning outcomes; notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes; level; type of assessment; form of participation in the learning activity; and the type of quality

---

[1] Incl. COM, Cedefop and the ETF
[2] 20 EU Member States and 8 Non-EU countries
[3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.243.01.0010.01.ENG

assurance underpinning the micro-credential. The standard elements are further echoed through the principles for design and issuance of micro-credentials, which include quality, transparency, assessment, recognition and other aspects.

The European Commission is involved in different activities, which include a Cedefop study, collaboration with the OECD to gather evidence and support for implementation, developing a European Open Standard for micro-credentials and an ETF call for micro-credentials for Ukrainian learners.

The EQAVET Secretariat explained that in many countries micro-credentials are a new concept that is currently being discussed, explored or piloted. Quality assurance processes vary and not all micro-credentials are quality assured on the basis of quality standards set at national level. Micro-credentials are often provided within a CVET setting, which is very heterogenous across Europe and within individual countries and there is no overarching quality assurance framework for CVET. In addition, some NQFs do not allow the inclusion for partial or smaller qualifications or qualifications outside formal learning settings.

Furthermore, the close links between the EQAVET indicative descriptors and the European principles for the design and issuing of micro-credentials in the Council Recommendation were highlighted.

Part 2: The Irish case

During the second part of the meeting, participants heard about how micro-credentials are conceptualised and used in Ireland. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) are responsible for the NQF, quality assurance of post-secondary education, validation and certification of private higher education and public and private further education and training. Within the Irish context and for the purpose of validation by QQI, a micro-credential must have the following:

- A volume of between 5 to 30 ECTS or FET (Further Education and Training) credits
- Designed to meet a current labour market need
- Targeted to a clearly expressed learner profile, and programme delivery and assessment methods appropriate to the learner
- Delivered using a blend of face to face and online, or solely online.

SOLAS, the state agency that oversees the Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland, then presented the Skills to Advance micro-qualification pilot project. The pilot has developed an enhanced training offer for enterprises and employees, including a suite of micro-qualifications in priority skills areas (aquafarming, robotics, green and digital skills) which are delivered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The project has established a collaborative model for industry engagement in further education and training and a programme development model that can be replicated more widely within Ireland. Underpinning the project, a strategic partnership exists between SOLAS and QQI and stakeholders, including ETBs, employers and employer representative bodies. Industry engagement has been important to prioritise critical skills and ensure relevant learning content.

In a subsequent panel discussion, the Irish discussants, representatives of a VET provider and industry representatives and employers, explained the benefits of micro-qualifications for learners and employers and shared their experiences.

Part 3: Country examples

During the third part of the PLA, Cedefop presented the interim findings of their project on micro-credentials for VET and the labour market. The project has been mapping micro-

credentials in European labour market related education, training and learning; exploring micro-credentials and evolving qualification systems; and examining micro-credentials and the added value for end users. The research has found that micro-credentials are growing, are often linked to innovations in learning and they usually address different needs to end users rather than traditional qualification. They seem to be emerging in areas such as ICT, engineering, manufacturing and construction but also in hospitality, health and social work. Cedefop has found there are broadly three groups of countries when it comes to the evolvement of micro-credentials:

■ Policy discussions are at an initial stage
■ Advanced policy discussions, e.g., where they are exploring micro-credentials in detail or aiming to include them in official documents
■ Legislation or draft regulations have already been introduced (but noting that the term micro-credentials are rarely included per se in documentation)

Three country approaches to micro-credentials were presented:

■ **Sweden:** The Swedish Agency for Higher Vocational Education is undertaking a pilot project on micro-credentials, looking at what is needed for micro-credentials to be recognised, how quality can be guaranteed and by whom, potential for stackability, the inclusion to the NQF and standardisation of micro-credentials. The project has looked at the type of quality assurance used to underpin micro-credentials and an excel template has been created for documenting standard elements to describe micro-credentials. Work is also underway around a model for benchmarking which looks at the added value for the labour market, principles for learning outcomes and assessment and quality assurance.

■ **Estonia:** Work on micro-credentials started in December 2020 which set up the terms of reference for a study on the possibilities of the introduction of micro-credentials, launched in May 2021. Subsequently, a legislative process was launched to introduce amendments to the Adult Education Act, scheduled for adoption in 2023. The Adult Education Act will be amended to provide a definition of micro-qualifications, state the volume of study and principles of provision and quality assurance mechanisms. Within Estonia, micro-qualifications are seen as a type of adult education and training in the context of lifelong learning, and part of the qualification system.

■ **Spain:** A new law was introduced in March 2022, defining a single VET system which integrates IVET and CVET; identifies the professional skills of the labour market; ensures suitable training offers; and enables training and its recognition. It also promotes professional guidance and counselling service. The new law also defines the procedures for quality management and assessment; and encourages and strengthens the accreditation of labour market competences. It includes micro-credentials at three levels (Grades A, B and C, within CVET) and it is possible to accumulate micro-credentials within CVET. Regarding quality assurance, at system level quality assurance will be carried out in line with the EQAVET indicators.

Part 4: Potential follow up

The participants identified the following areas that need further discussion at national level, and further exchanges at European level:

■ Principles, regulations and legislations regarding quality standards and quality assurance of micro-credentials
■ Managing changes in terms of minimizing disruptions and undertaking communication efforts to promote the benefits

- NQFs need to be open and inclusive with trusted procedures in place for including micro-credentials (including from formal and non-formal learning)
- The duration of procedures and the costs for validation/quality assurance of micro-credentials need to be clarified
- There are questions around the enabling policy framework, and the role of government.

Further information

On the resource page to the meeting you will find further information, including a background paper, the presentations delivered at the meeting, and the Council Recommendation on micro-credentials, and wider European reading materials.

A more detailed synthesis report from the meeting will follow in a few weeks' time.