Quality Assurance of micro-credentials in VET

Synthesis Report from the EQAVET Peer Learning Activity

8-9 November 2022

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1. Policy context

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. Given the pace of change it is difficult for education and training systems to keep up-to-date and ensure that learning meets the needs of the labour market. 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. Such learning opportunities can be more accessible to learners (i.e., online, shorter time required), flexible around other commitments and therefore make lifelong learning an increased possibility for more people. 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. In the State of the Union 2022 speech[1], the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that 2023 will be the European Year of Skills[2]. The European Commission suggests specific priorities including promoting and increasing investment for training, ensuring skills are relevant for labour market needs, supporting the green and digital transition to activate more people and enhance the economic recovery and attracting skilled workers from third countries by facilitating mobility and the recognition of foreign degrees.

2. Objectives of the PLA

The PLA offered an opportunity to bring together the EQAVET Network to share and reflect on experiences of countries that have been implementing micro-credentials, or have established a framework for introducing them, and to discuss open questions around quality assurance of micro-credentials. Guiding questions for discussion included:

❖ To what extent do the micro-credentials in the individual countries comply with the definition of micro-credentials set out in the Council Recommendation, the 'European standard elements for the description of micro-credentials' and the 'European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials'?

❖ Are micro-credentials included in the NQF and which NQF/EQF levels are concerned? Is it mostly about learners in IVET or workers in CVET?

❖ To what extent are and how can micro-credentials be integrated in formal education and training, and the education and training system (incl. CVET)?

❖ What does this mean for quality assurance – are there any requirements that are specific to micro-credentials? What type(s) of quality assurance is (are) used in your country to underpin the micro-credentials in VET?

❖ How does the situation differ for non-formal and informal learning – what quality assurance issues arise in these sectors?

❖ What is the role of labour market stakeholders in the QA process?

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10431&furtherNews=yes

3. Introduction to micro-credentials

There is a high level of interest of the potential use of micro-credentials in the VET sector as they have the potential to be adaptable and responsive to the needs of the labour market, creating small and targeted learning opportunities. During the first part of the meeting, the European Commission presented the key features of the Council Recommendation on a European approach to 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 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 not seeking to create new systems within EU Member States, but rather encourages them to adapt current provision, which will allow them to have a better overview, understanding, comparability and transferability of micro-credentials across Europe. The idea is to address education, training and active labour market policies in the widest and most comprehensive way.

The European Commission priorities for implementation are:

❖ Adopting and promoting the use of building blocks;

❖ Facilitating the ongoing and emerging development of micro-credentials, and

❖ Delivering on the potential of micro-credentials.

The European Commission is currently overseeing a number of initiatives which include, a Cedefop study on micro-credentials, collaboration with the OECD to gather evidence and lessons learnt from projects already in place with the aim to provide guidance and support for implementation across Members States. In addition, the European Commission has started to develop a European Open Standard for micro-credentials to facilitate the exchange of information between different actors. The document will be ready towards spring 2024. Finally, the Commission is also overseeing a launch of 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. In terms of quality assurance, there must be procedures in place to ensure the quality, transparency, and relevance of microcredentials. To date, quality assurance processes vary and not all micro-credentials are quality assured based on 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.

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[3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2022.243.01.0010.01.ENG

In addition, it is not always possible for a micro-credential to be included on a national qualification framework (NQF), as some NQFs do not allow the inclusion for partial or smaller qualifications or qualifications outside formal learning settings.

4. 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. They are also responsible for qualifications recognition. In Ireland, their national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is well established, and it includes four principal classes of awards (qualifications)[4]. The quality assurance framework includes guidelines as well as the validation of programmes. It also includes statutory external reviews of institutions/providers and reporting, monitoring and enhancement. The framework is a policy instrument used by all stakeholders. It is perceived as an important vehicle to offer relevant support and training to workers in need of upskilling and reskilling in the context of the green and digital transitions. There is a high level of public awareness of the NFQ.

Within the Irish context and for the purpose of validation by QQI, a micro-qualification 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. Partnership is key - it requires a lot of effort to ensure the engagement of enterprises, but collaboration with stakeholders and co-creation is a key success factor.

According to preliminary results of the project, agile learning opportunities are welcomed by the employees. Micro-credentials changed the attitude of employees to learning and boosted their confidence to develop their skills further and undertake more training. Employers also found that the development of micro-credentials have helped to improve the skills and productivity of their workforce.

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. Micro-credentials allowed, for instance, employers to re-skill their employees and address labour shortage issues in remote areas.

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[4] Major awards (including Certificate, Bachelor, Master, Doctorate), Minor awards (for partial completion of Major Awards), Special Purpose awards (for narrow or purpose-specific achievements) and Supplemental awards (learning that is additional to a Major Award).

5. Country examples

5.1 Cedefop – micro-credentials for VET and the labour market

During the third part of the PLA, Cedefop presented the interim findings of their project on micro-credentials for VET and the labour market[5].

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 constitute an 'alternative' to a traditional qualification.

Microcredentials seem to be emerging especially in innovation-heavy in areas such as ICT, engineering, manufacturing and construction but also in hospitality, health and social work, or related to industry or professional certifications (e.g. hygiene passports in the hospitality sector, vendor certifications in the ICT sector, etc.) 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)

Among the latter group are countries that have introduced legal reforms in VET and adult learning that explicitly open up opportunities for microcredentials. For instance, Croatia's new Adult Education Act, adopted in December 2021, introduced 'micro-qualifications' into formal adult education. Other countries use microcredentials or an equivalent, but do not use the term. For instance

- ❖ In France, despite the lack of an official definition, microcredentials are largely accommodated in practice and are viewed favourably
- ❖ Ireland has included short courses and certificates in its NQF since its establishment in 2003 which are called micro-qualifications (see section 4)
- ❖ In Germany, the market for modular training, partial qualifications and qualification supplements has grown rapidly but a reserved approach at policy level is observed, so there is no unified terminology
- ❖ In Netherlands, not in national policy -since 2017, it has been possible to issue online microcredentials called 'edubadges'
- ❖ In Malta, awards that lead to partial qualifications share the characteristics of microcredentials.

The incorporation of micro-credentials into different NQFs varies between European countries. However, in many countries there is the modularisation of qualifications and opening up of NQFs to qualifications awarded outside of formal education and training, both of which pave the way for the inclusion of micro-credentials in NQFs. Where micro-credentials are attributed to the EQF or NQF, the majority are at levels 2 to 5.

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[5] More information can be found on the following web pages:
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/microcredentials-labour-market-education-and-training
and: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/5587

Micro-credentials can also be used as a tool for facilitating the recognition of prior learning (RPL) towards the award of a larger qualification, but there are very few countries that offer the opportunity of 'stacking' microcredentials. For instance, 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 (see section 5.4). Latvia's new law also allows microcredentials to be accumulated towards a full qualification or to be used as stand-alone qualifications. In Denmark, labour market training courses offer various upskilling and reskilling courses that build on prior learning. However, across Europe, a lack of adequate quality assurance for the use of micro-credentials in RPL was observed.

Micro-credentials appear to have the potential of making learning more flexible, adaptable and relevant. They can provide better lifelong and wide learning opportunities and they may be able to better respond to labour market needs and needs of individuals. Yet, some countries are concerned that micro-credentials may lead to a shift in preferences to short duration learning over full qualifications.

According to Cedefop research, further barriers to a wider uptake of microcredentials include

- ❖ lack of adequate and transparent quality assurance standards
- ❖ uncertainties amongst employers whether holders of microcredentials do possess the competences described or not
- ❖ lack of transparency in how learning outcomes are assessed and documented
- ❖ lack of adequate knowledge of microcredentials
- ❖ the wide range of terminologies used which represent a source of confusion to many employers
- ❖ lack of formal recognition of some microcredentials by national authorities
- ❖ incompatibility of some microcredentials with national qualifications systems; and
- ❖ limited opportunities for the accumulation and combination of microcredentials.

5.2 Sweden

The Swedish Agency for Higher Vocational Education is undertaking a pilot project on micro-credentials, looking at the model for micro-credentials in the Swedish context, technical solutions for the digital issuance and the inclusion on the Swedish NQF. The project is working with the Swedish public employment service and Rise (Research Institutes of Sweden), and it is funded by the Swedish Innovation Agency. The project is 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 and harmonisation at the EU level. 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.

5.3 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. Only HE institutions can offer micro-credentials called micro-degrees. Learning outcomes correspond to the level of micro-qualification, programme or professional standard in the NQF. The volume of study is lower than for formal education and it is possible to accumulate and combine micro-qualifications to reach the full qualification. Quality assessment of micro-credentials is organised by the Estonian Quality Agency for Education. Curricula development should be in cooperation with employers and relevant to labour market needs. Activities are being implemented, including the ['Training Credit'](#) programme in cooperation between companies and HE institutes. For the academic year 2021/2022 three Estonian universities are offering micro-degrees. In addition, several Estonian VET centres are offering partial qualifications in IT, which can be transferred into micro-qualifications as soon as the regulation is in place. Regulation of micro-credentials at state level could help to fully develop the potential of micro-qualifications.

5.4 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; defines and regulates training offers; and encourages and strengthens the accreditation of labour market competences. It refers to three tools to establish a single VET system: a national catalogue for professional competence standards, a modular catalogue of vocational training and a national catalogue of vocational training offers. The law includes micro-credentials at three levels (Grades A, B and C, within CVET) and it is possible to accumulate micro-credentials within CVET. The new structure will facilitate the access to courses, and make education and learning pathways flexible as each person will be able to design their own learning pathway based on their needs.

Regarding quality assurance, at system level quality assurance will be carried out in line with the EQAVET indicators. Coordinated quality monitoring will be conducted at national and regional level and a common assessment system will be designed at national level. At provider level, quality verification tools and certification systems will be designed. There is a large communication campaign with the 16 autonomous communities (Spanish regions), between the regions and VET providers, employers and learners to introduce and explain the added value of the new system.

6. Workshop discussions

6.1 Workshop 1 summary

Q1: How can micro-credentials be linked with national qualifications frameworks and how can they be a tool for validation of prior learning?

The workshop focused on the challenges linked to the development of national qualifications frameworks and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Sweden, and how it relates to the situation in other EU countries. The national framework is open and inclusive but reflections are ongoing to better support the labour market and learners, create a culture of trust for all stakeholders and give added value to end-users. In the current system, providers submit their micro-credentials to authorities who assess them and must pay a relatively expensive fee for each micro-credential. If an end-user detains several micro-credentials, RPL can allow for an exemption to be obtained to ensure portability. However, the real level of portability is not high.

The length of a qualification and the number of learning outcomes included represent a challenge to quickly assess and implement them.

In Ireland, the quality assurance process also requires efforts from providers. RPL applies to programme learners start, but also programmes that learners move to. The cost of micro-credentials is important as well. Providers need strategic advice and guidance to develop the relevant micro-credentials and not invest too much. Well-established providers are better equipped to develop micro-credentials.

In Belgium-Flanders, the system is not as open as the Swedish and the Irish systems. Partial qualifications exist but can't be delivered on their own and must be part of larger qualifications. Time pressure and cost are also important challenges. In the Czech Republic, the state is working on developing a unified framework at system level for micro-credentials to allow the cooperation of the multiple stakeholders involved in the process and better regulate them.

Q2: How can we assure the quality of stand-alone micro-credentials? And what role should the government play in this process?

In Sweden, the state is reflecting toward the added value to get involved in quality assurance of micro-credentials. The private training market is important, and organisations see business opportunities as individuals are willing to pay high costs to acquire micro-credits and the state finances the skill transition and support students. Many actors are active and have a desire to enter the training market, but the quality, relevance and added value of the micro-credentials brought by these companies must be checked.

In Ireland, the mechanism of cost-recovering has been introduced to limit the number of applicants. In Belgium-Flanders, on the other hand, education is free as the state is focusing on formal education. The state wants to get more involved in non-formal education to ensure the quality of micro-credentials.

Some countries also working on communication actions to raise awareness on micro-credentials to the public who have no or limited awareness. Austria promotes the NQF as a tool to the public. In Belgium-Flanders, the promotion targets specific action such as the recognition of prior learning. In Sweden, the setup of a database in 2016 has allowed to showcase the results of the activities carried out by the state and helped raising awareness.

6.2 Workshop 2 summary

Q1: In micro-credentials, if the learning outcomes are fully achieved does the assessment method matter? If the assessment method changes from what is stated, does the course need to be re-accredited?

The workshop explored the topic of assessment methods within micro-credentials, and the possibility to change the assessment methods. The Institute for Tourism in Malta provides micro-credentials for the tourism industry in customer care where the assessment method is an essay. It is possible to amend the assessment method in cases of learners with additional needs. However, there are a high number of learners for whom the written assessment method may not be appropriate. For these cases, there are discussions on if it is possible to amend the assessment method, without having to re-accredit the entire qualification.

In Ireland, if learners have specific needs that make a written assessment difficult there is the provision of different assessment methods and flexibility is built into assessment formats. However, if the qualification validation is based on a specific assessment method, then it is not possible to change, and revalidation would be required. Efforts are being undertaken to ensure that the assessment methods for micro-credentials are broad, e.g. by including skills

demonstrations and project based assessments. In contrast, in Finland it is possible to use different assessments - whether micro-credentials are used or not - as the VET provider is responsible for the assessment process and they can adapt the assessment to students' needs.

In other countries micro-credentials are not included in the VET system or discussions are beginning. In Luxembourg, micro-credentials are not integrated into the VET system or legal regulations. There are additional qualifications and certificates in certain areas, such as first aid and wellbeing, but they are not considered as micro-credentials and there is no overall regulation for these qualifications. For them to be considered as micro-credentials, they would need a legal basis, quality assurance processes and the appointment of an awarding body. In other countries, such as Slovenia, there are discussions around micro-credentials and how they may supplement, and/or complement, the current VET offer, or if they are already provided in a different way.

Q2: What is the added value and currency of micro-credentials in the labour market? What measures can be taken to avoid fragmentation of qualifications?

Several countries are exploring questions around the added value and currency of micro-credentials with employers, learners and within the wider labour market. Greece explained that they have recently introduce a new law focusing on quality assurance in IVET and they are now looking at the added value and use of micro-credentials, and how employer buy-in can be gained. There are also open questions on how to avoid the fragmentation of qualifications if micro-credentials are exclusively driven by labour market needs.

Ireland have amended the Minor Awards (qualifications), and these are considered as micro-credentials. The only change has been a reduction in the time that the learner needs to complete the award. SOLAS collaborated with employers, enterprises and others to understand industry needs so that specific qualifications could cater for priority skills' needs, thus upskilling and reskilling employees in certain sectors. Employers view micro-credentials as a way of upskilling, or reskilling, their workforce and employees see it as a way to retain their job. There is a large number of SMEs and micro-enterprises and they find it hard to release staff for training. Therefore, micro-credentials are delivered with 25% in a classroom setting with the remaining delivered via self-directed learning. This makes it easier for employers to release their workers and easier for learners to participate.

In Croatia, they are also looking at added value of micro-credentials and how they can avoid fragmentation. They currently have units of learning outcomes that are small volumes of learning, with a small time requirement from learners, which are meant for upskilling and reskilling purposes. Work is underway to look at micro-credentials and how they can be used in emerging skills and knowledge areas, how to document and recognise them. In Croatia, micro-credentials are seen as a potentially useful way to quickly respond to labour market needs and targeted towards adult learners, but further work is needed on the recognition.

6.3 Workshop 3 summary

Q1. What assessment methods are considered appropriate for micro-credentials? Do all programs need to have some sort of assessment to be considered for micro-credentials?

The workshop participants discussed that due to the large variety of potential microcredentials – regarding size as well as educational content - assessment methods also vary and can range from concluding questions to an online course to written exams, essays, or practical skills demonstrations.

Slovakia plans to introduce 'open' assessments into validation of non-formal and informal learning; hence applicants can attend the assessment of other candidates if they wish, which gives them an opportunity to get a better sense of what is required.

It was agreed that assessment is part of the quality assurance process and should be a requirement for the validation of certificates from the non-formal sector, but a general recommendation on what methods to use cannot be given.

Q2. For end-users (individual holders as well as education or labour market receivers) to trust micro-credentials, which conditions must be met to ensure portability and transferability - information to be contained; trust to be generated?

Cedefop research shows that across Europe, trust is still an issue related to microcredentials, for various reasons. The education and training sector often struggles to link microcredentials to the (trusted) standards established for formal systems. Moreover, an oversupply of providers and certificates can cause devaluation and confusion within stakeholders, especially learners and employers. These issues can be addressed by quality assurance measures, at provider level as well as system level. Providers should be required to have QA measures in place; and attempts to regulate the market by linking microcredentials to NQF can help to increase trust. Yet, so far, in most countries, certificates from learning that could be considered microcredentials are part of the non-formal sector. Therefore, portability and transferability strongly depend on the availability of opportunities for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

It was also discussed who should be 'in the drivers' seat': In many countries, microcredentials are an industry-driven innovation. An enabling policy framework for microcredentials might help to regulate the market and address concerns related to quality, transparency and relevance, but would also raise questions of who should be in charge of the development of microcredentials.

7. Food for thought

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
❖ Validation and recognition of microcredentials against the standards of formal education: NQFs need to be open and inclusive with trusted procedures in place for including micro-credentials (including from non-formal and informal learning)
❖ Managing changes in terms of minimizing disruptions and undertaking communication efforts to promote the benefits
❖ The duration of procedures and the costs for validation/quality assurance of micro-credentials need to be clarified
❖ There are open questions around the enabling policy framework for microcredentials at national level, and the role of government.