

EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council (TTC)

EU-U.S. Talent for Growth Task Force

Workstream activity report

Workstream 4 – Credentials (including micro-credentials)

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Overview

Credentials are key to highlighting and signalling the skills that individuals have acquired over the course of their lifetimes. While traditional credentials include formal degrees and qualifications, micro-credentials have recently grown in popularity amongst adult learners looking to re- and up-skill quickly and efficiently. Micro-credentials are organised learning activities that award a credential upon completion, where a credential recognises a skill that has been acquired through this learning process and validated through an assessment (OECD, 2023) (relates to topic of workstream 3 of the Task Force on skills-first approaches). They are typically shorter in duration or workload, more targeted in terms of skills or subject matter, and more flexible in delivery than a traditional degree programme.

Well-designed micro-credentials can enable learners to re-train and up-skill quickly and efficiently. Hence, they have a valuable role to play in keeping up with the rapid pace of change in skill needs. Their modular and targeted nature means that learners can fill specific knowledge gaps or address particular skills shortages in a relatively short amount of time. This is especially useful in the technology sector where the speed of technological advancements requires workers to continually engage in skills development. Moreover, micro-credentials are often delivered in a flexible way, making them a particularly attractive training option for women and minority groups who often face high barriers to participating in training. In this way, micro-credentials can help boost the diversity of the workforce (topic of workstream 2 of the Task Force).

At the same time, barriers to more widespread adoption of micro-credentials persist. There is much variation in the size and format of micro-credentials, in who offers them and who uses them, and, crucially, in the standards for quality and recognition that underpin them. These divergences make it difficult for employers, learners, and providers to retain confidence in the wide and varied micro-credential landscape and hinder them from tapping into their full potential. Quality assurance practices and infrastructure remain underdeveloped, contributing to low trust in micro-credentials. A lack of awareness of micro-credentials, especially among under-represented groups, and fragmented or hard-to-navigate course platforms further impede access to training opportunities. Where micro-credentials have not been integrated into existing adult learning systems, it can be hard to ensure consistent provision, reporting, or recognition of the content, delivery, and assessment of micro-credentials across different providers. Lastly, insufficient data collection on who completes micro-

credentials and what their outcomes are leaves potential learners with a dearth of information on micro-credentials' impacts.

Further background research and analysis can be found in the [OECD report for Workstream 4](#).

Workstream Activity

16 January 2024, Workstream 4 Kick-off Meeting: Opening remarks were delivered by Stefan Olsson (Task Force Co-Chair) and Giulia Meschino (Workstream Leader) before the OECD presented the findings of its background research on the current micro-credential eco-system and the challenges to greater adoption of micro-credentials. This research was discussed by attendees before Ms Meschino and Mr Olsson identified next steps and gave closing remarks. Key takeaways from this meeting include:

- Central challenges to micro-credential adoption identified by the OECD include the limited data availability on learners' outcomes, a lack of trust in quality, and incomplete integration into the adult learning system.
- Task Force members noted the importance of maintaining quality when upscaling micro-credential provision and pointed out some tools and resources that already exist to ensure this, such as a [guide](#) to the design, issue and recognition of micro-credentials published by the European Training Foundation (ETF).
- Certain sectors facing labour shortages – including the technology sector – might benefit most from the rapid up-skilling micro-credentials can provide. However, Task Force members agreed that it is important to address general challenges to the micro-credential sector as a whole, as this would benefit multiple sectors.
- Some Task Force members shared details on relevant ongoing micro-credential projects, including Cisco's Networking Academy program, SOLAS' efforts to expand adoption of micro-credentials, and the forthcoming World Alliance for Microcredentials.

16 February 2024, OECD Workshop: The OECD hosted a webinar entitled "Micro-credentials: Practice and potential", inviting experts from industry, academia, the non-profit sector, and labour unions. After an introductory presentation by the OECD highlighted four challenge areas for micro-credential adoption, the OECD moderated two panel sessions. The first panel discussion asked panellists to share their insights into how to create and deliver programmes that provide the best value for workers, especially within the technology sector. Invited speakers included Microsoft, Cisco, IBM, and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). The second panel focused on strengthening the micro-credential system itself: panellists were asked to discuss how micro-credentials can be integrated into larger skill systems, how high-quality content can be fostered, and how to raise public awareness of micro-credentials. Invited speakers were representatives from SOLAS Ireland, Huron Consulting Group, Learning Digital, and Digital Promise. Key takeaways from the workshop included:

- Providers have many avenues to facilitate access to micro-credentials, and there is a role for public-private partnerships to build awareness and improve

take-up. IBM, for example, partners with civil society organisations that have a significant comparative advantage in reaching disadvantaged groups, such as minorities, veterans, migrants, or those with disabilities. Cisco has a dedicated programme for women in IT and initiatives to connect learners with employers.

- It was noted that despite recent growth in the demand and supply of micro-credentials, little is known about their effectiveness. Speakers reflected a greater desire to evaluate the impact of programmes, however noted that concerns for data privacy limit data collection efforts. There is still scope for action, for example by acquiring learners' consent to analyse their data, partnering with organisations who maintain relationships with learners, and by using credential meta-data that are not linked to specific individuals.
- SOLAS noted how industry-relevant programmes are created – it conducts “relevance assessments” and facilitates collaboration between micro-credential creators and experts within industry to identify skills needs and ensure that this is reflected in micro-credentials' content. It also discussed Ireland's new Further Education and Training micro-credentials model which aims to link micro-credentials to other qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework, facilitating greater integration and transparency.
- Ways to improve accessibility and inclusivity of micro-credentials were discussed. The effective design of micro-credential websites and the creation of centralised, easy to navigate platforms is key – Digital Promise discussed how their platform prioritises accessibility. They conduct “equity audits” of the language and content of its courses, and aim to remove other access barriers such as the need to create an account, to improve inclusivity.
- Speakers also mentioned the upcoming World Alliance for Micro-credentials (to be launched in May 2024), which will bring information to learners to make it easier to compare and understand the differences in content and assessment of various micro-credentials.

11 March 2024: Workstream 4 Meeting 2

Opening remarks were delivered by Manuela Geleng (European Commission) and Giulia Meschino (Workstream Leader) before the OECD presented its updated findings and policy recommendations on the micro-credential sector (see below). Following the presentation of the report, Task Force members were invited to provide comments and feedback.

- SMEUnited noted that, in many successful experiences, a government central body or high-profile authority overseeing the micro-credential landscape is often key to catalyse much broader recognition and partnerships for micro-credentials, citing the case of Ireland.
- Discussions then turned to alternative ways to develop trust in micro-credentials beyond a government-led approach. Within the private sector, it is often the reputation of the micro-credential provider that confers a credential its legitimacy, which can pose a challenge for smaller providers.
- Cisco shared the experience of its Network Academy, whose reputation is largely based on Cisco's own high profile, which nevertheless collaborates with the public sector to align the Network Academy with national educational efforts. Learners who complete enough of Cisco's micro-credentials, for example, can be regarded by the Department of Labour as having completed a certified apprenticeship.

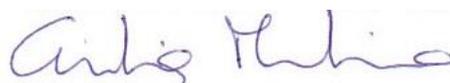
Looking ahead

Continuing initiatives by EU VET providers

EU-level VET provider associations EVTA and EVBB organised together with the EU agency European Training Foundation (ETF) an international workshop on the topic of competence-based assessment, which has been shared with the Task Force Members to join. The workshop is part of an initiative that aims at exchanging good European practices with a delegation from Ukraine, with micro-credentials playing an important role for the reconstruction after the war in the country. A first [online session](#) was organised in January, with site visits and in-person workshops coming up in the future.

European providers of Vocational Education and Training have also shared with the Task Force Members their current work on developing a global alliance on micro-credentials (World Alliance for Microcredentials) for VET practitioners, Higher Education institutions, Authorities and other stakeholders interested in micro-credentials, in cooperation also with partners from the US and other regions of the world. The aim is to exchange best practices, define technical specifications and identify implementable solutions for micro-credentials. Members were invited to reach out to the organisers to join the alliance, the initiative is planned to be formally established in the near future and be officially launched in May 2024.

*Adopted by workstream leader
Giulia Meschino (Secretary General of EVTA)
on 25 March 2024:*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Giulia Meschino', is positioned below the typed text.

References

OECD (2023), Public policies for effective micro-credential learning, *OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No.85*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a41f148b-en>.