

EFEE Statement on the initiative “A European Approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability”

Brussels, 27 April 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the needs of European economies and societies profoundly, with a long-lasting impact on generations to come. To recover from this crisis in a resilient and swift way, it is essential to meet these new needs, particularly triggered by the accelerating technological progress of the twin transition.

The pandemic, however, has unravelled that these needs currently cannot be satisfied in the form of supply of adequate and solid skills and competences. Studies have shown that a great number of European people across all age groups lack basic knowledge, skills and competences being essential for the digital and green transitions.

In the light of the growing demands to close these gaps, the market of short learning opportunities offered online by a numerous of diverse public and private providers has experienced a significant boost. However, with this growing landscape and in the absence of a common definition of micro-credentials, the question of how their quality can be raised. Consequently, this seemingly unwieldy and non-transparent landscape has limited trust in micro-credentials, especially at the national level.

As an education social partner whose objective is to foster innovative and inclusive education at all levels of lifelong learning, the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) welcomes this initiative on “*A European Approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*”. However, we simultaneously would like to highlight that the initiative also has to be viewed through a critical lens of education employers and formal education providers. In the following, EFEE wishes to provide further insights regarding its support by answering the questions posed by the Commission on its background note for this Consultation Hearing.

1. What is your view on the above description of the state of play and problem analysis?

We agree that short learning opportunities in the form of micro-credentials represent a valuable additional source to not only boost the recovery of European economies but also and foremost ensure inclusive and innovative lifelong learning beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, these resources remain widely untapped at national level as the definition of micro-credentials as well as the quality, portability and comparability of therewith bound offers remain abstract. For this reason, the removal of these mentioned barriers represents a crucial first step towards the

promotion of micro-credentials and their potential to close knowledge and skills gaps within a short amount of time. In this regard, we would like to emphasize that for the promotion of micro-credentials on national ground a sound and need-based allocation of funds of already existing instruments, such as Erasmus +, is of utmost importance. Investing in verified providers, such as national authorities and universities, providing qualitative short term learning services represents a vital component to foster and increase trust in the use of micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials need to be independent and recognizable units with a transparent quality according to internationally agreed quality standards. In this sense, the supply of micro-credentials must be transparent, including content, degree of innovation, costs and places where to get the micro-credentials at offer. Against this backdrop, it is vital to tighten the quality standards of micro-credentials to national qualifications frameworks. In order to guarantee this from the onset, micro-credentials should be first and foremost **supplied by formal education providers**. Furthermore, for the success of micro-credentials, it is crucial that their supply is made digitally available in a transparent manner, for example via a European digital platform. Regarding the design of such a platform, it is essential to continuously involve European and national social partners as well as national formal education providers in order to further strengthen credibility and trust in the use of micro-credentials.

Regarding the validation of learning outcomes of micro-credentials across educational sectors, the specificities of the individual educational sectors need to be taken into account. As commonly known, the VET sector is different from the higher education sector. With the final report published by the higher education consultation group in December 2020, the initiative seems to be content-wise very much focused on higher education where short-term learning can be validated by the use of ECTS points. This system is based on time investment and doesn't fully meet the needs of VET where the recognition of competences needs to be based on output. Specifically, this quality assessment approach would be problematic in Continuous VET (C-VET), a sector which has not undergone as much regulation as Initial VET (I-VET). It is of the utmost importance to take this state of play into consideration. As outlined by the Osnabrück Declaration and a wide range of studies such as the CEDEFOP study on the "Attractiveness of initial vocational education and training", the intercorrelation and therewith bound synergies of standards between the higher education and VET sector will become even more crucial beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true with regards to the twin transition. Consequently, we suggest to take a more flexible approach with regards to the quality assessment of micro-credentials, taking the specificities of the individual education sectors into consideration.

Bound with the topic of quality assessment is the one of how to simplify the recognition of micro-credentials for public providers such as universities and education and

training institutions among different European countries. We very much welcome the fostering of the portability of micro-credentials across European borders as it represents an opportunity for educational institutions to deepen their collaboration in a European context by, for instance, jointly developing learning programs across borders. In doing so, they contribute to more international mobility and overall, achieving a European Educational Area by 2025. Furthermore, a facilitated exchangeability of micro-credentials makes it possible to combine innovations from different countries. Consequently, innovations become more accessible to everyone, sparking, in turn, the spirit of innovative thinking, providing an essential basis for the recovery of European economies and societies beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding an enhanced portability and cross-national recognition of earned micro-credentials, we support the further building on the success model of the Europass by development of an Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure. We encourage the Commission to continuously involve national formal providers in education in the design of this infrastructure in order to ensure coherence with national qualification frameworks and therewith bound flexibility.

Furthermore, what also has to be taken into consideration with regards to the portability of earned micro-credentials is the aspect of native language. For formal education providers being located in countries such as France, Spain and, above all, the UK with English as the lingua-franca, it will be easy to develop training and education being recognized in Europe or abroad as they find a vast language being able to understand and/or actively use their native language in Europe as well as non-European countries.

Further, we also consider a better portability of micro-credentials among different education sectors of crucial importance for the personal and professional growth of all learners as well as the parity of esteem between the different types of education. In this regard, for instance, an employee (or any person) at higher education level should be able to follow modules at VET level and vice versa. Thereby, micro-credentials should serve to facilitate the recognition of foremost skills acquired in the formal education setting, such as post-secondary or training courses provided by schools and universities, across education sectors.

To certify such valuable learning outcomes, a model of certification of formal and informal learning can and should be used, as long as duly certified and in line with the capabilities of each formal educational provider such as schools, universities and training institutions alone or in consortiums. In this regard, adaptability and flexibility represent key components. Portugal, for example, has a model of certification in place which requires developments and is based on the RVCC model (Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences). Consequently, this requires a widening of the ECTS

model, and a greater permeability between educational frameworks, allowing a citizen to “flow” from one area to another, making possible a formal shift in a person’s competences.

Moreover, the value of micro-credentials as a means to validate competences of newcomers in the EU, such as refugees, needs to be more explicitly strengthened so that the initiative can fully meet its inclusive potential. Hence, we consider a more interlinked approach of the initiative with regards to existing funding instruments such as the Asylum and Migration Fund (AMIF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) as important as the linkage with existing policy initiatives such as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Furthermore, as above-mentioned, micro-credentials should foremost serve the recognition of skills acquired in formal education settings. Nevertheless, in the face of our global and inclusive societies, micro-credentials should also facilitate the recognition of some prior skills even if acquired through non-formal learning. They should do so in a way that they provide incentives to migrants to enroll in formal education provided by formal education providers such as schools and universities. In doing so, the threshold for refugees and migrants is lowered to access formal education and to obtain formal qualification.

2. What is your view on the policy objectives of the initiative? What is your view on the value that a European approach could add to the development and up-take of micro-credentials?

We welcome the rather broad setting of the objectives seeing as this acknowledges the importance of maintaining the flexibility of national qualification frameworks. Furthermore, bound with these objectives is the opportunity to attract attention to the potential micro-credentials bear for lifelong learning as well as their already existence in formal education settings. In many European countries formal (degree) studies in different sectors are already composed of micro-credentials. However, the term “microcredentials” is not specifically used in these contexts, which causes the existence of micro-credentials as such and their potential remains vastly unknown.

In light of this, we consider a European approach on micro-credentials valuable with regards to establishing coherence with regards to the definition, standard elements and objectives but at the same time maintaining flexibility, acknowledging the competence of member states in this area. In order to increase the value of this initiative, we encourage the Commission to take the following points into consideration, which are based on those already indicated in the previous chapter.

Objectives 2: Make it easier for employers and education and training providers to understand and compare these credentials and to issue them according to a minimum set of common standards

Objective 3: Increase the visibility of skills acquired by individuals through short learning experiences leading to micro-credentials

Objective 4: Enhance the flexibility and personalisation of learning and career pathways

Flexibility and personalisation are key terms to uphold the quality of future learning beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Micro-credentials, thus, open additional doors for learners, especially for disadvantaged ones. By making use of these short-term learning experiences, learners across all educational levels award crucial professional but also personal competences, fostering their development into active and responsible citizens. Fostering and acknowledging these competences, flexibility, for instance with regards to intra-EU mobility is needed. Micro-credentials should make it, for instance, easier to learn across borders (including digital learning) by facilitating recognition and exchangeability of earned micro-credentials among formal providers, including schools, universities and training institutions. Furthermore, the EU should try to create a model that can be intertwined with other systems in the world, creating the conditions, for example, for a fast-track model of recognition of competences by immigrants. In this regard, international cooperation with educational providers is crucial in order to avoid the model being too EU-centralized.

Objectives 5: Facilitate transparency, trust, portability and stackability of micro-credentials for labour market and lifelong learning purposes

Objective 6: Increase the efficiency of training provision (stackability, innovation, inclusion) and enhance their role in lifelong learning

In view of market developments, it is important that the public sector (with distinctive values such as a well-trained staff, good infrastructure, relevant experience and knowledge) clearly demonstrates its profile and value, with a societal responsibility in a broad sense. In this regard, inclusion plays a crucial role being enshrined as a central topic in the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Furthermore, the EU should be careful about data protection regarding the use of micro-credentials. In this regard, the following questions will be of central importance: Will there be a central

data bank to register those credentials? If so, who will be in charge of the monitoring of such a data bank? Another important point to reflect upon is that in order for micro-credentials to be useful there should be a quality system in place for those issuing them (based on audits for example and government regulations. Moreover, it is crucial to establish a system to make sure that such micro-credentials are sound, so that they cannot be counterfeited and bought on the internet.

Finally, the cooperation with social partners needs to be continuously upheld in order to ensure that the quality, content and value (in terms of costs and benefits) of the modules are recognized and acknowledged.

3. What is your view on the key elements of the possible definition, standard elements and building blocks presented in section 3?

We overall agree with the definition, the selection of standard elements as well as the building blocks. However, we encourage the Commission to add the roles of established education providers such as universities and VET schools as well as the one of social partners to those three elements.

Furthermore, the target group of the initiative should be further specified with regards to the key elements. In the definition, the term “learner” is used as a broad audience term, seeming to include learners from all educational levels. However, the mentioning of ECTS in both standard elements and building blocks gives the impression that the target group of the initiative rather focuses on higher education and adult learners. In order to ensure that all learners can benefit from micro-credentials for the sake of their personal and professional learning growth, we emphasize the need to open up the initiative to learners from all educational stages, starting from early childhood education and care. Furthermore, the focus should not only be on adults as it can also be interesting for young people, for example, a higher education student would like to follow a module at VET level for his portfolio, or a VET student would like to further develop his expertise at higher education level.

4. What is your view on the respective role and contributions of social partners, Member States and the Commission, in the context of the proposed Council Recommendation?

As the voice of European education employers, we welcome micro-credentials as an added value in the course of lifelong learning in the sense that they enable learners to bridge knowledge and skills gaps relevant to the labour market within a short amount of time. However, they should not be regarded as educational outcomes being equivalent to diplomas and other recognized certificates, being legally validated by national qualification frameworks. Diplomas and certificates should remain the

privilege of both public and private education providers in order to avoid the risk of multinational corporations setting up micro-credentials by using teaching staff from low wage countries. Hence, in order to safeguard the social rights of teachers and employers, education remains a competence of Member States. For this reason, it is vital that the legal framework bound with micro-credentials aligns to the national qualification framework in order to guarantee the qualitative value of micro-credentials against the backdrop of the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. From our point of view, micro-credentials should be primarily used to validate skills acquired in formal education institutions.

As a social partner in education, we emphasize the importance of a closer cross-collaboration between stakeholders of educational institutions, ICT support organizations, employment services and social partners on the promotion of micro-credentials from the onset of an individual's learning development. This collaboration is of crucial importance in order to ensure synergies of interests to secure the civil value of education. Despite its importance, in the framework of this collaboration it is crucial that the education sector, specifically higher education, remains its academic and institutional autonomy.



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