

Joint ETUC – ETUCE Position on Micro-credentials in VET and tertiary education

Adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 23 June, 2020

Adopted at the ETUC Executive Committee on 2 July, 2020

Background

In recent policy discussions the European Commission brought forward with an increasing intensity the idea of micro-credentials in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. The topic of micro-credentials came up recently within the Advisory Committee for VET (ACVT) meeting in relation to the future Skills Agenda initiative , and within the Bologna Process Follow-Up Group (BFUG) meetings in relation to the forthcoming Rome Communiqué and a project on micro-credentials in higher education. The European Commission’s discussion paper presented to the ACVT meeting (10 June 2020) mentions that this topic will place an important role in forthcoming policy initiatives of the European Commission as “The Commission has started a reflection on a possible European approach to micro-credentials. A common initiative between Commissioners Gabriel and Schmit, involving education and training and labour market stakeholders, **aims for a roadmap of actions to be taken at EU level to ensure the take-up, validation and recognition of micro-credentials.**”

One of the problems is the lack of an agreed definition and common understanding on micro-credentials at the European level. The European Commission’s discussion paper defines micro-credentials as following: “*Micro-credentials are statements that acknowledge that a person has acquired a discrete competence, i.e. knowledge, skills and/or experience in a well-defined and limited area.*” We believe that the European Commission’s definition is very vague, and we think the definition suggested by SUNY University can be considered as a starting point to develop a European definition of micro-credentials: “*Micro-credentials verify, validate and attest that specific skills and/or competencies have been achieved and are endorsed by the issuing institution, having been developed through established faculty governance processes and designed to be meaningful and high quality.*”¹

OECD Working Paper (2020)² on alternative credentials within higher education explains the term “alternative credentials” as “credentials that are not recognised as standalone formal educational qualifications by relevant national education authorities”, and they can be awarded at all levels of

¹ SUNY Micro-Credentialing Task Force Report and Recommendations.

<https://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/academic-affairs/Micro-Credentialing-TaskForce-Report.pdf>

² OECD (Shizuka Kato, Victoria Galán-Muros, Thomas Weko): The emergence of alternative credentials, March 2020

education. Concerning higher education, the paper refers to a new EU project (MicroHE³) which defines micro-credentials as a “sub-unit of a credential or credentials that confer a minimum of 5 ECTS, and could accumulate into a larger credential or be part of a portfolio”.

Micro-credentials can be employer-led certificates (e.g. of Cisco, Microsoft, etc.), or provided by education institutions (e.g. via Massive Open Online Courses – MOOCs).

Joint ETUC and ETUCE position

Workers’ trade unions and education trade unions have several concerns about the emerging focus on micro-credentials as they would have a significant impact on the holistic approach to education, quality and recognition of employee training, collective agreements and staff in the VET and higher education sectors.

Now that the COVID-19 crisis will have a major impact on the education sector and upskilling and reskilling will be needed as part of a just transition for workers in the shift to a digital and green economy, we express our great concern that the European Commission’s policy does not target actions and investment to solve these real problems but comes up instead with new initiatives, such as the one on micro-credentials, which has not been requested by the education sector, workers and employers. We ask the European Commission to focus on ensuring **sustainable public investment in education, a European right to training which helps workers and employees with fair career development, and support for the unemployed and “low-skilled” adults** through formal recognition of their skills competencies and to receive the necessary basic and professional skills to get a job. It is important that upskilling and reskilling trainings of the workers and the unemployed who do not have a full qualification provide them **both social and professional skills and competences** to ensure that they not only reach a full qualification but have a strong position in the labour market for the transitions.

1. The **COVID-19 crisis** is having an enormous impact on workers and education staff. On the one hand a high unemployment rate among workers entails the risk that some of them will remain long-term unemployed and eventually lose their skills, while on the other hand the education sector had to shift to emergency remote teaching from one day to the other which had and will have further impact on the education sector as a whole, as well as on teaching, and teachers’ working conditions. Thus, we are surprised that the European Commission is introducing the new initiative on micro-credentials in terms of tackling the impact that the COVID-19 crisis has got on skills development and education and training in relation to the labour market. This focus will be harmful for the **acquisition and recognition of full qualifications**. Due to the COVID-19 crisis full

³ MicroHE Project <https://microcredentials.eu/>

qualifications are more important now to fight against growing inequalities and because of need of recovery in light with circular economy, climate change and digitalization.

2. While we acknowledge the necessity of some micro-credentials issued by companies in relation to their expertise (e.g. Microsoft), we remind that the whole education system cannot be shaped around the labour market. **Education is a public good** and it should prepare students to become democratic citizens and employees. This holistic view of education must be protected to allow students to acquire social skills, not only short-term labour market relevant knowledge. We are deeply concerned that the strong focus on micro-credentials can lead to bypassing formal education systems, while the recent public health crisis has shown how important education is.
3. We are concerned that the European Commission has been developed this topic at high level without involving the trade unions on defining the necessary work or a potential roadmap at European level on micro-credentials. We underline the utmost importance of **social dialogue** with the relevant unions on a policy initiative which will have a significant impact on workers and education staff. We regret that the European Commission plans to integrate the issue of micro-credentials in forthcoming policy initiatives on VET and higher education without having **any common understanding, definition or agreed opinion** on this at EU level. We ask the European Commission to help reaching a common definition on micro-credentials based on thorough independent research, discussions within a working group with qualifications experts of the governments and social partners. We request to define with such a group if any European-level initiative is necessary on micro credentials, and develop an impact assessment.
4. **Recognition and trust** in micro-credentials would ensure transferability of the micro-credentials between education and the labour market and among countries, and would allow for them to be added to full qualifications. Micro-credentials can increase workers possibilities to access flexible lifelong learning and can complement workers' upskilling and reskilling. However, we support micro-credentials only when they are **complementary to full qualifications, quality assured and accredited**, when they are recognised as a proof of achievement and not only validated, and they play a role in validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL). They should be validated and recognized by the VET-institutions, cross-sectoral and sectoral trade unions and employers. Micro-credentials should be meaningful and have high quality. They should be based on **standards on delivery mode, assessment procedure, and duration**, and they should indicate how they link to full qualifications. We remind that according to CEDEFOP⁴, modularisation of initial and/or continuous VET programmes is used in many countries as a flexible way to address the training needs of groups with challenges, such as the unemployed, and of workers who need upskilling

⁴ Cedefop, 2018: From long-term unemployment to a matching job
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3076_en.pdf

and reskilling, but they need to be recognized and be placed within systems of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation of non-formal and informal learning of prior learning and work experience is essential to reduce necessary long-term training periods. Micro-credentials could be recognised as a proof of achievement, not only a proof of attendance, but they must not be recognised as a diploma /full qualification which aims a broader education or training horizon. Therefore, the name of the micro-credentials must differ from the name of the full-qualification, and micro-credentials must be given for what their contents are and not have the name of the full qualification they refer to.

5. Micro-credentials therefore should have a value at national and European level only when they are **part of full qualifications** which are referenced in the **European Qualification Framework (EQF)** and have a level in the respective **National Qualification Frameworks (NQF)**, based on **assessment** and defined **learning outcomes and curriculum** of micro-credentials. We are concerned that some VET providers have already started to issue micro-credentials and level them in the NQF at the same level as the full qualifications the respective micro-credentials should be part of. This is alarming as such actions **endanger the credibility of the EQF and NQFs**, as well as the trust in qualifications. This also disturbs the labour market, off-sets collective agreements, and it is dangerous for the learner if micro-credentials are used as stand-alone certificates. Therefore, we require that micro-credentials should correspond to a standard size of training (not too small), stand as a proof of achievement/certificate which should clearly explain that it is not a full qualification and what part of the full qualification it consists of. It should be clear also if micro-credentials have any validity.

6. The trade unions have been very critical about any education and training provision that focuses entirely on one certain knowledge or skill, but which does not provide them with a full qualification. In relation to ECVET⁵ we had requested that the European Commission should not push forward national reforms to introduce **unit-based learning in VET** which divides qualifications into modules while full qualifications are linked to collective agreements. We have highlighted the need for the **recognition of units of training** (within initial and continuous VET, for students, employees or adults' training schemes) as part of a **full qualification as linked to collective bargaining agreements**. We cannot support cutting up and dividing existing full qualifications into units or certificates as qualifications and the definition of qualifications fall under national competence and are **subject to social dialogue on professional qualifications and collective agreements, and therefore strongly related to salary**. Full qualifications / degrees are essential for employability and only these should be considered guarantees as collective agreements are based on them.

⁵ European credit system for vocational education and training

7. We remind that collective bargaining agreements focus on qualifications and credentials and not on micro-credentials. In general **employers do not recognize micro-credentials**, however in some countries and certain sectors **macro-credentials** are recognized due to collective bargaining agreements. The labour market needs full qualifications and micro-credentials should not push the **responsibility of further learning from companies to employees**. In addition, the greatest danger of micro-credentials is that anyone can **provide micro-credentials**. However, if an employee needed to obtain a micro-credential every time when he/she should acquire a new skill, it would increase the numbers of micro-credentials to a level which cannot be monitored. This would not only question the **accountability** of micro-credentials, but it would endanger the control over the micro-credentials and hugely affect collective agreements.
8. The European Commission argues that **employers** are keen to look for micro-credentials and give them higher value than full qualifications. However, concerning the provision of micro-credentials **quality assurance and accreditation** are key issues to ensure the trust of the learner and of the employer and to protect the learner and the quality of education. Therefore, micro-credentials should link to credits and recognition and micro-credentials developed by employers need to be transferable. It is important to define **quality requirements of the providers of micro-credentials** and possibly accreditation.
9. Strict regulation to ensure that micro-credentials remain within the **formal education process** should link to the requirement of **pedagogical training** for teachers and trainers of such short study programmes. Concerning the use of micro-credentials in the teaching profession, we remind the European Commission about existing national regulations and requirements for teachers to be fully qualified, and that their **professional autonomy and academic freedom** must be respected within the education and training sectors.
10. Finally, we underline the importance of respecting individual **academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions** which have been under attack from labour market demands and public budget cuts, which force universities to seek additional funding, often by providing short-term courses for the labour market. We echo the concerns of the OECD Education Director Andreas Schleicher who said that the increasing digitalisation of learning and the development of micro credentials—short online courses that provide students with a digital certification or a “badge” when complete—would see *universities’ power in education decrease*⁶.

⁶ Speech at the Education World Forum in London on 21 January, 2019

<https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-he-agencies-other-2019-micro-credentials-threaten-universities-says-oecd-director/>