



CREDinGREEN

Responding to tourism market changes caused by Covid-19 and the EU Green Deal
through micro-credential-certified upskilling of SME tourism managers

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Micro-credential Strategy

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1.Preamble

With the 2021 Erasmus+ programme priorities, the European Commission made a very interesting education policy statement: For the HE sector, the stimulation of “innovative learning and teaching practices [...] by facilitating the take-up, validation and recognition of short learning courses leading to micro-credentials” was promoted (EC, 2021b, 169); at the same time, “quality assurance in vocational education and training” was requested to be improved by “setting-up and testing graduate tracking arrangements in line with the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates, and the Recommendation on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), as well as exploring EU vocational core profiles and micro-credentials.” (ibidem, 172)

Already at the planning stage for the CREDinGREEN project, it was clear that its training course should be aligned with the concepts of micro-credentials. Unfortunately, there was – and still is - not too much helpful information available, when starting with this concept from scratch. According to the *European Skills Agenda* (EC, 2020b), it was vaguely stressed that micro-credentials play a role in the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*, which was under development at the time (EC/DG EMPL 2021).

A little clearer was the *Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025* which postulated the aim of the “automatic recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad for the purpose of further learning, quality assurance of joint transnational activities and the recognition and portability of short courses leading to micro-credentials. This would allow Member States to go deeper and faster in their cooperation, as compared to what they are able to do now in the context of the Bologna process.” (EC, 2020a, 12). It further announced that “the Commission will work towards the development of a **European Approach to micro-credentials, to[sic!]** helping to widen learning opportunities and to strengthen the role of higher education and vocational education and training institutions in lifelong learning by providing more flexible and modular learning opportunities.” (ibidem, 15)

A glimpse into the future was provided by a *consultation group* set up on this topic by the *European Education and Culture Executive Agency*; their bet on micro-credentials’ role in EU education systems of tomorrow reads very promisingly:

In 2030, European citizens will be able to start their learning pathways into and through higher education at any stage during their lifetime. On top of the qualifications already achieved, micro-credentials will provide learners with rich opportunities to diversify their learning and improve their education by taking shorter courses. These micro-credentials can be linked thematically and be based on the expertise gained. Their alignment to standardised descriptors (e.g. for professional profiles, skills taxonomies, education level, type of evidence, etc.) will ensure that they are equally understood and recognised by employers, educational establishments across sectors, geographic areas and the wider

society. Through this, micro-credentials will play a major role in encouraging and realising lifelong learning and a society of learning, which – through critical reflection of societal and business processes – will create better lives and better opportunities for all. (EC/GD EAC, 2020, 9)

Oriented at the very successful *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System* (ECTS), a comparable model applicable for the post-university and VET¹ education sector should be developed. This should help to overcome incredible fragmentation of national VET markets and the problems it causes for a modern Europe. The confusing number of different definitions, structures and terminologies for one and the same profession which all manifest themselves in rather closed national education systems with their own training contents, quality and certification standards as well as recognition bodies creates a monstrous and anachronistic drawback to the needs and realities of EU citizens and economy. (CEDEFOP, 2020)

The problem with this concept is to find definitions and standards that are accepted in all EU countries. A first attempt to define a micro-credential was communicated by the EC in January 2022; an information brochure states:

A **micro-credential** is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a **small volume of learning**. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined **standards**.

Courses 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 **standalone or combined** into larger credentials. They are underpinned by **quality assurance** following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity. (EC, 2021a; bold characters taken from brochure)

Along came some - partly mandatory, partly optional - standard elements which were recommended to be used when issuing micro-credentials.

What EU standard elements should it include?

The basis for trust in micro-credentials is transparency. Micro-credentials should be clearly identified as such with elements that make it possible for learners, education and training institutions, quality assurance agencies, and employers to understand the value and content of micro-credentials and to compare them.

The European approach to micro-credentials suggests a list of critical information elements that any micro-credential should provide:

Mandatory elements	Optional elements, where relevant (non-exhaustive list)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of the learner • Title of the micro-credential • Country/Region of the issuer • Awarding body • Date of issuing • Learning outcomes • Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS credits, wherever possible) • Level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable • Type of assessment • Form of participation in the learning activity • Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prerequisites needed to enrol in the learning activity • Supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online or onsite with identity verification) • Grade achieved • Integration/stackability options (standalone, independent micro-credential / integrated, stackable towards another credential) • Further information

(EC, 2021a)

¹ Micro-credentials are actually aimed more at CVET (Continuing Vocational Education and Training), but because there is no clear differentiation in public communication, we will continue to use the VET hypernym.

At first sight, this reads well and nobody would deny these nicely formulated and sensible frameworks. But after a second glance, these appear as being very general formulations which do not help greatly when you want to set up a reliable and accepted micro-credential system from scratch. The *identification of the learner*, the *title of the micro-credential*, the *country of issue*, the *awarding body* etc. is information that can be found on every other diploma too, and is not really new information. Neither is there any indication regarding the scope and limits of a micro-credentials nor who is authorised to act as the awarding body - and who is not.

The high level of uncertainty for users was also an issue of the *Council of the EU* in its *Recommendation on the European approach to micro-credentials for life-long learning and employability*. It confirmed that micro-credentials are increasingly in use in the EU, but criticised that this is precisely why it is difficult to understand that “there is no common definition of, or standards for, micro-credentials in Europe. This limits the understanding and uptake of micro-credentials, and therefore undermines the potential of micro-credentials to facilitate flexible learning and career pathways. This recommendation aims to support the building of trust in micro-credentials across Europe among all those involved, whether providers or beneficiaries.” (Council of the EU, 2022, 4)

Therefore, the Council encourage Member States to to *promote* and support, where appropriate, effective experimentation, cooperation, governance and partnerships between i) education and training institutions, ii) social partners, iii) employers and industry, iv) research and innovation organisations, v) civil society organisations, vi) employment and social inclusion services and vii) local, regional and national authorities. (ibidem, 22) Getting everyone on board and creating ownership within the main target groups and stakeholders is a very participative approach and increases the chances that each country, each region, each institution can adopt the micro-credential regulations in a way most suitable to their frameworks. On the other hand, this increases the risk that each country, each region and, in some cases, each institution will set its own definitions, standards and rules for the awarding of micro-credentials, which may be consistent with the respective national, regional or institutional frameworks, but have a very limited European dimension and acceptance.

As it stands, this is unfortunately exactly the situation in which European education systems are currently stuck. There are several success stories of micro-credential systems that work well, but these are not widespread applications.² Studies by several EU projects on the development and acceptance of micro-credentials show that there is no joint understanding of micro-credentials concept within the EU and that most countries have not even begun to seriously address this issue.³ The currently most up to date and holistic report on the introduction of micro-credentials into national education systems published by CEDEFOP in 2023, draws a slightly better picture but it also confesses that there is still a long way to go and there is a realistic threat of not even reaching the finish line!

² E.g. Flinberg (2023) reports this for Sweden, Sørensen (2023) for a Danish employer and business association and Feerick (2023) for an Ireland-based higher education online learning platform.

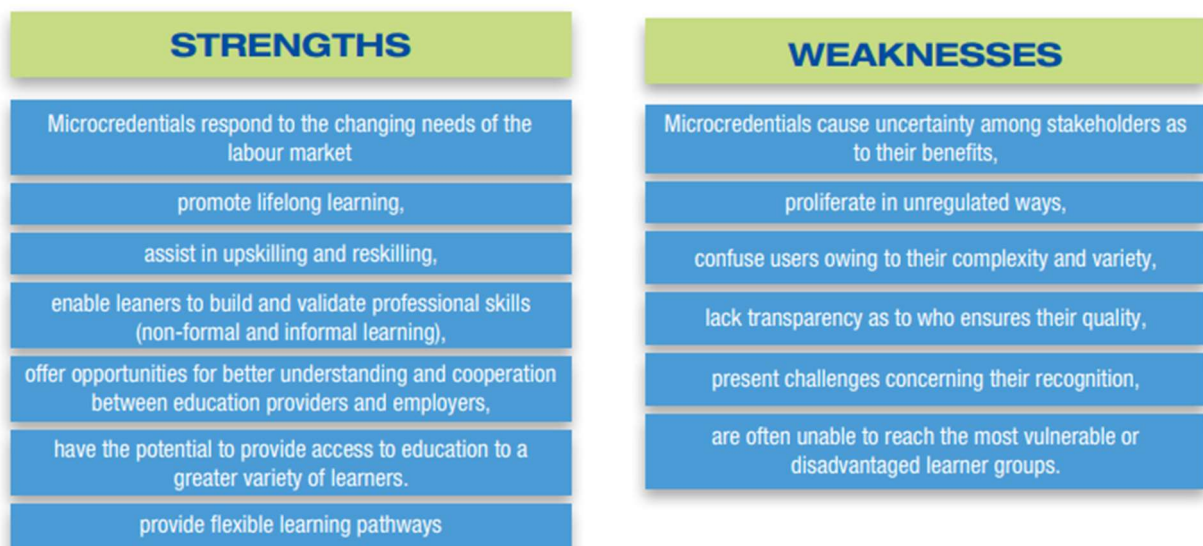
³ E.g. CREDinGREEN (2022), MicroQuest (2022) and MicroVET (2022).

Although there are some improvements, at least at national levels, the following barriers to the wider uptake of micro-credentials in VET policies are – more or less – evident in all country reports and publications that take a critical look at this topic:

- lack of adequate and transparent QA standards
- uncertainties about nature of micro-credentials
- the way learning outcomes are assessed and documented
- lack of formal recognition by national authorities
- incompatibility of some micro-credentials with NQ systems
- limited opportunities for the accumulation and combination of micro-credentials

The future of the micro-credential in Europe is wide open and the most diverse scenarios are possible, ranging “from a European MC [Micro-Credential] registry and opening up NQFs [National Qualification Frameworks] to more incremental approaches based on metadata and easing comparability. Both from a user and system perspective each of these scenarios has advantages but also challenges given the diversity of the provision system.”⁴ (Pouliou/Pliakis 2023, 15-36)

A holistic up-to date overview of strengths and weaknesses of Europe’s micro-credentials approaches is provided by CEDEFOP (2022):



Despite all the difficulties, Europe must not let up in its micro-credential endeavours because this educational policy instrument simply has too many advantages and is too successful - also worldwide. Due to their small-scale design, their easy access via learning platforms, many digitised processes and the associated low costs, it is not surprising that micro-credentials are becoming increasingly popular, particularly in poorer and more populous countries. (OECD 2023, 2) Many official education initiatives are now based on them, such as the one recently initiated by UNESCO in Southeast Asia (Teter, 2023).

⁴ A holistic up-to date overview of strengths and weaknesses of Europe’s micro-credentials approaches is provided by CEDEFOP (2022).

It remains to be seen whether educational authorities within the EU will succeed in addressing these weaknesses. As things stand, this may be very difficult, as there are a myriad of national and institutional working groups trying to formulate generally accepted standards and recognition structures - but without contact with each other and without the authority to enforce them on a broad scale. There is a certain threat that all the different parties and stakeholders involved are too entrenched in their own systems, standards, frameworks, dependencies and mindsets to see the bigger European picture.

What would be most helpful, however, is to change this attitude. National education policy makers, experts, employer and employee representatives and education providers could take a step back from their own positions and open themselves and their systems up a little. Instead of trying to force micro-credentials into their own narrow national system, they would benefit from opening up their system to the more flexible global concept of micro-credentials. They should finally start to focus on what unites different national education systems rather than what divides them. It also helps to recognise the strengths of other countries' education systems and to critically question the weaknesses of one's own. But rather than pointing the finger at others, we should look at what each of us can do to move things forward. We all need to demonstrate that we are doing for ourselves what we so readily ask of our students: to be lifelong learners and to adapt openly and constructively to change.

It would be desirable for the EC to show more initiative and courage to take the lead in providing clearer guidelines, standards and definitions for the use and application of micro-credentials at European level. From the grassroots perspective of implementing a practical EU project, it would have the advantage of giving those responsible for developing innovative training programmes a clearer idea of what standards to aim for when taking learning programmes to a transnational level.

2. Derivations and recommendations

From the situation summarised above, the following conclusions can be drawn for the accreditation of the CREDinGREEN training programme:

- The concept of micro-credentials is viewed positively by all partners and all are willing to integrate it into their existing training certifications.
- However, due to the inconsistent factual and developmental situation at European and national level (none of the partner countries has a nationally applied and accepted MC model), it is not possible for us to develop a practicable concept for all partners. The necessary standardised European or national guidelines and frameworks do not exist.
- Due to the low level of anchoring of MC in the national education systems, these qualifications are not yet very well known, prestigious or accepted by the learner groups (at least this has been our experience during our project work, especially in the pilot training courses). At the same time, however, learners have shown themselves to be open to and interested in this new accreditation

model.

- Despite the unfavourable circumstances, the CREDinGREEN partnership is willing to contribute to the discussion on MC and propose operational solutions, even if we have to set our quality standards at a very low level.

Therefore, the partnership has agreed on the following standards and requirements for the accreditation of the CREDinGREEN learning outcomes with 1 micro-credential (MC):

- §1 The CREDinGREEN training course comprises 60 hours (2 ECTS points), which can be accredited with 1 micro-credential (MC).
- §2 The awarding institution must be certified and recognised as a training institution for vocational education and training and/or higher education in accordance with national legislation and frameworks.
- §3 Educational institutions have the obligation to take into account national standards and frameworks (if any) when awarding the MC.
- §4 In the status quo (February 2024), only the educational institutions represented in the partnership are entitled to award the CREDinGREEN micro-credential.
- §5 As it is the clear intention of all project partners to increase the number of educational institutions, any other educational institution is free and welcome to include this course in its curriculum; all course materials are available free of charge.
- §6 However, all teachers of the CREDinGREEN course must have previously attended and successfully completed a train-the-trainer programme of at least 10 hours. This training can only be provided by authorised CREDinGREEN training institutions.
- §7 Only institutions already authorised as CREDinGREEN training institution can certify other training institutions. In addition to the training of the teaching staff, the criteria include the content and strategic orientation of the educational institution as well as its professional and pedagogical excellence.
- §8 A MC can only be awarded if the learner has completed 100% of the course content; however, it is possible to have up to 30% of the course content credited through previously acquired learning experience (formal and informal).
- §9 A MC can only be awarded if at least 60% of all learning objectives have been successfully completed; in accordance with the flexible structure of the course, the assessment of performance is subject to internal standards and specifications.
- §10 The accreditation certificate can be adapted to national or institutional templates and frameworks, but it must contain at least the information and data specified in the proposal below. The data and information labelled "optional" are also desirable but not mandatory.

3. Micro-credential certificate requirements

[Title of the micro-credential]

Awarded by:

Region/Country:

Date of issuing:

Grade achieved: (optional)

Identification of the learner:	
Learning outcomes:	
National workload	(in ECTS, if possible)
Level of learning experience:	(e.g. following EQF, QF-EHEA)
Prerequisites requested to enrol the training:	(optional)
Form of participation in learning activity:	
Type of assessment:	
Type of quality assurance:	
Supervision and identity verification: (optional)	<input type="radio"/> Unsupervised with no identity verification <input type="radio"/> supervised with no identity verification <input type="radio"/> supervised online/onsite with identity verification <input type="radio"/> other:
Integration/stackability options: (optional)	<input type="radio"/> standalone micro-credential <input type="radio"/> integrated/stakeable towards another credential specification (if any): <input type="radio"/> other:
Further information	(optional)

Signature and stamp of awarding body

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