Towards a European approach to micro-credentials: a study of practices and commonalities in offering micro-credentials in European higher education

NESET Analytical Report, 2020
Summary

The growing use of micro-credentials is an outcome of competing societal and economic forces and macro-level trends, reflecting changing perspectives as to what individuals, employers and governments expect from higher education. The major macro-level trend contributing to the growing use of micro-credentials is the changing nature of the labour market and growing uncertainty as to what work will look like in the future. Fewer 'jobs for life' now exist, and employers demand flexibility and quick reactions to changing circumstances. The report provides a background analysis that will inform the European Commission with regard to the development, provision and recognition of micro-credentials.

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NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training, set up at the initiative of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC).

The Network is one of the seven key knowledge providers that contribute evidence-based advice to DG EAC. NESET provides reliable, independent and rigorous scientific support, country-specific expertise and advice to the European Commission in relation to equity and social aspects at all levels of education and training. NESET acts as a knowledge broker, bridging the gap between EU policy coordination and the academic world.

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Towards a European approach to micro-credentials: a study of practices and commonalities in offering micro-credentials in European higher education

Context

Gaining the right skills and competences helps individuals to adjust to constant technological developments, as well as global and demographic changes, in order to ensure their own well-being. In line with these changes, people need to be equipped with basic digital, vocational, technical, entrepreneurial, transversal and foreign language skills and competences. Higher education providers have a role to play in providing the necessary skills and competences via flexible ways of learning, as well as through the provision of more short-term courses and by ensuring easier recognition and certification for these new and expanded types of learning. The use of micro-credentials by higher education providers has the potential to foster continuous learning, fill the knowledge and skills gap, increase the efficiency of the higher education system, encourage innovation in provision, and to reach a diverse group of learners.

The report and its key findings

The report finds that the common characteristics shared by the majority of currently available micro-credentials are that they are acquired after a relatively short period of learning, are expected to be relevant in the labour market, and may recognise the development of wider transversal skills. Despite these shared characteristics, micro-credentials differ in terms of their modes of delivery, content, providers, the possibility of receiving credits, the time period for learning, objectives, usefulness, prerequisites, assessment and validation process, integration and stackability options, as well as in the types of certificates received. For micro-credentials to become better integrated into higher education systems, they must be well designed and understandable to all interested parties. Having easily accessible, informative and comparable information can create greater trust and transparency with regard to micro-credentials among stakeholders. The study suggests that the following list of critical information items should be provided for micro-credentials operating within the framework of a European approach.
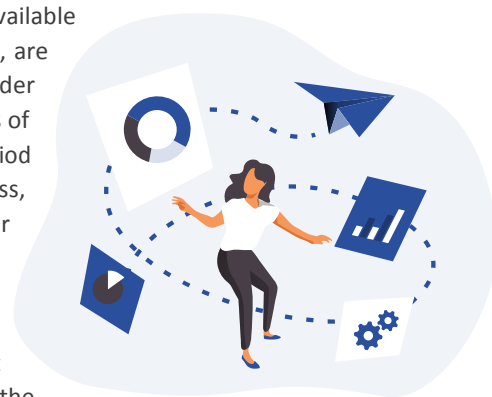
TITLE *of the micro-credential, which precisely signals the learning outcomes*

PROVIDER *of the course*

DATE *when the micro-credential was issued*

DESCRIPTION *of the course content and its purpose*

LEARNING OUTCOMES *what the successful learner knows, understands and can do based on this assessed learning*

HOW LEARNER PARTICIPATES *online, onsite or both online and onsite*

CREDITS *number of credits provided, if credit-bearing*

TIME PERIOD *when the learning took place*

ANY PREREQUISITES *that were required to begin the course*

LEARNING RESOURCES *relevant for the credential*

TYPE OF ASSESSMENT *testing, application of a skill, portfolio, etc.*

SUPERVISION *and* **IDENTITY VERIFICATION** *unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online or onsite with identity verification*

QUALITY ASSURANCE *the body ensuring the quality of the course*

OUTCOME FOR A SUCCESSFUL LEARNER *admission to a degree programme, credit towards a degree programme, certification or digital badge earned, number of credits*

INTEGRATION / STACKABILITY OPTIONS *standalone, independent course / integrated, stackable towards another credential*

Indicators to measure the success of a European approach to micro-credentials

• Increased **trust** in alternative credentials across all social systems: education, the labour market and society.

• Enhanced **transparency** regarding the learning outcomes achieved as a result of short learning courses.

• **Educational innovation** is encouraged rather than hindered as a result of the common approach.

• **Flexibility** for all learners in choosing most suitable learning pathways.