

Position paper of eucen on the public consultation on Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability: eucen and micro-credentials¹

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The global Covid-19 pandemic has put on the table the urgent issue of digitalisation and the need for up-skilling and re-skilling our citizens in short time periods. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has just been an accelerator of some trends that were coming up already in the last years. Besides digitalisation, the climate crisis and the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development are the topics that have already started re-shaping our lives and the ways we will work in a few years from now on.

Universities already play a prominent role in supporting the development of so-called future skills, in accompanying students who come back to university and who are in need of different new skills and competencies, by integrating the relevant topics in their respective programmes. It is often university lifelong learning (ULLL) or university continuing education (UCE) that serves as gateway for innovation and for new topics and that is the “boundary spanner” between the academic and the outside world (Seppälä, Santos, Atabarut, 2017). It is especially in this specific setting where innovation takes place, where new topics are shaped and new forms of learning, both inside and outside the classroom are practised. ULLL is at central stage when it comes to bridging different worlds, and when it is both about professional programmes and about programmes that enhance social inclusion and other important societal needs.

The last years have seen a trend in higher education that is relevant for the rising importance of ULLL as boundary spanner: There is an increasing number of shorter and more job-oriented programmes (not part of degree programmes) with earning certificates or badges or other forms of credentials, responding to different demands as lifelong learning, continuous professional development or additional skills for different groups of learners. Their numbers have increased both through a greater interest by industry and policy on national and European level, but also through their flexible provision, boosted not least by digitalisation (Gaebel, Zhang, Stoeber, & Morrisroe, 2021, S. 23).

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eucen as multidisciplinary association for university lifelong learning across Europe aims to contribute to the social, economic and cultural life in Europe through the promotion and advancement of lifelong learning (LLL) within higher education institutions (HEI) in Europe and elsewhere. We also aim to foster universities' influence in the development of LLL knowledge and policies throughout Europe, promoting a democratic model that takes into account societal needs. One focus of this work is at HE-VET level, where **eucen** provides a bridge between the industry and the HEI by means of developing and implementing education programs regarding the new trends.

eucen believes that micro-credentials provide a multi-faceted form for supporting lifelong learning. Following the working definition of the European Commission "a micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards." (European Commission, 2020).

eucen supports micro-credentials (conditional to some caveats described below) as they serve very important goals of university lifelong learning both for social inclusion and for supporting employability that have been pursued by **eucen** and its members across Europe for the last decades. We would like to stress the importance of micro-credentials for different reasons (in line with Cirlan & Loukkola, 2020):

- They are an important step to further *advance* the recognition of prior learning by facilitating the process of recognition – given there are transparent clear standards in place. Hereby, the referencing to qualification frameworks helps to classify these credentials and to recognize them for (university) lifelong learning.
- They help university lifelong learning and continuing education centres to *respond* more quickly to both societal and professional needs and thereby to *liaise* with different providers of learning – as companies, VET schools/providers, public and private institutions – always with the goal to fully apply quality standards of higher learning.
- They bring new skills and competencies that could *enhance* existing programmes and hereby help to *shape* the individual learning paths and learning goals of the students both in work-based learning programs as in lifelong programmes.
- They enable further enhancement in the area of *partnership* with enterprises/industry/community organisations in the design and development of curricula, where experts both from academia and enterprises may provide a much richer and targeted learning experience for learners and clearly demonstrates the potential impact of these courses on the learner, the organisation and the community.

For serving these important goals of valuing and recognising different pathways of learners and the learning gained in different settings, forms and on different occasions, **eucen** strongly advises to take care of the following aspects:

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- It is important that the micro-credential includes the central learning outcomes. They are both a prerequisite and important currency for the recognition of prior learning but also for making clear what the learner has gained in terms of knowledge, skills, and responsibility and autonomy.
- Equally important is to define the level and scope of learning, to allow better understanding of where the micro-credential is positioned in the continuum of learning and in the EQF.
- The integrity and holistic approach of the programs should not be missed. Learning should be about developing knowledge and understanding, not just enhancing economic potential.
- An important step for the recognition of prior learning is that the learning has been assessed and that the assessment method corresponds to the learning outcomes.
- It is also important to develop a quality assurance system to ensure that the level of knowledge gained.
- Standardisation is important and special attention should be given not to cause commercial exploitation through micro-credentials.
- Finally, it is important that the recognition of micro-credentials and the usefulness of their recognition is decided by the institution where the credential is brought - so the university or the ULLL/UCE centre.

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