

A New Agenda on Micro-credentials: Filling the Gaps in the European Approach

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| <i>Keywords</i> | Abstract |
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| micro-credentials, EU policies, higher education, adult education | This paper analyses the potential of micro-credentials in adult education through upcoming EU policies and initiatives, bearing in mind the increasing use of online learning platforms globally. Understanding national and international approaches to micro-credentials allows undergraduate programmes and teaching practices to flourish in economically less developed countries. The Republic of Serbia welcomes new approaches in the search for acceptable models of distance learning and equality in the labour market. |

Introduction

Using only formal education pathways does not always result in good opportunities, and learners as well as educators must find new approaches for personal development (Babić-Kekez, 2014; European Commission, 2021). In a conversation with a representative of the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE), the author realised that the term *micro-credential* is rarely heard in the national context of adult education. This is a very similar case as in neighboring Slovenia, where there “already exists a wide range of short educational and training programmes, some of them are formalised, some of them are not, but none of them are described as microcredentials” (Marentič & Mustar, 2023, p. 20). The problem lies in the fact that short courses in Serbia are called training, seminars or webinars and are most often related to professional development, and recent educational policies may have a significant impact on the formation of national educational policies, as is the case with Serbia (EAEA, 2023).

Various credentials are offered to students, professionals (educators, STEM teachers and other experts), adult learners outside educational institutions and others through (international) university programmes and/or via online learning platforms. Ones such as *edX*, *Coursera* and *FutureLearn* have long been leaders in the Anglophone area offering online degrees and certificates in popular disciplines (Oliver, 2019). These platforms provide access to current courses for in-demand and profitable occupations along with a wide range of training offered within the professional development of teachers at all levels of education.

The main aim of this paper was to analyse the current state of European policies in higher education and adult education towards national qualification frameworks that can accept micro-credentials. Also, the implications for their use in practice are given, as well as some of the usual obstacles, with an emphasis on educational needs in Serbia.



From Higher Education to Adult Education

The search for alternative, shorter forms of learning suggests that there is a certain empty space between the outcomes of initial education and the needs of the modern EU labour market (Marentič & Mustar, 2023; CEU, 2022). The European approach to micro-credentials is “focused on two primary micro-credentials user groups, university students and adult education learners with the aim of ensuring more flexible and modular learning possibilities as well as offering inclusive learning forms” (Kušić et al., 2022, p. 152). Several projects have been launched to study and encourage their use: *MICROBOL*, *MicroHE* and *MicroCredX*. Their key initiatives are overcoming all political, educational and structural obstacles and encouraging the use of micro-credentials in the wide market, establishing a network of institutions that prepare students for learning in a digital environment and adapting offers for learning and acquiring qualifications to people who are outside the higher education system (see MicroCredX, 2023, par. 1).

The European approach to new concepts and educational directions implies clear definition and standards that will enable students, professors, workers, job providers and other interested individuals and institutions to understand the benefits of learning and certifying that learning in order to join the European labour market with recognised skills. As the basis of trust in micro-credentials, transparency has been proclaimed and a list of mandatory and optional elements that they should provide was formed (European Commission, 2021, p. 2):

Mandatory elements:

- Identification of the learner
- Title of the micro-credential
- Country/Region of the issuer
- Date of issuing
- Awarding body
- Learning outcomes
- Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes
- Level of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential
- Type of assessment
- Form of participation in the learning activity
- Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential.

Optional elements:

- Prerequisites needed to enrol in the learning activity
- Supervision and identity verification during assessment
- Grade achieved
- Integration options, etc.

In 2019, the European MOOC Consortium (EMC) launched a *Common Microcredential Framework* (CMF) to create portable credentials for lifelong learners and help them to develop new knowledge, skills and competencies from shorter, recognised and quality-assured courses, which can also be used to earn traditional university qualifications. Courses must have the following specifications to be evaluated as micro-credentials:

- Have a total study time of no less than 100 hours and no more than 150 hours, including revision for, and completion of, the Summative Assessment.
- Conform with Level 6 or Level 7 in the European Qualification Framework or the equivalent levels in the university's national qualification framework.

- Provide a summative assessment that enables the award of academic credit, either directly following successful completion of a microcredential or via recognition of prior learning upon enrolment as a student in the university's course of study.
- Operate a reliable method of ID verification at the point of assessment that complies with the university's policies and/or is widely adopted across the platforms authorised to use the CMF.
- Provide a transcript that sets out the learning outcomes for a microcredential, total study hours required, European Qualification Framework level and number of credit points earned (EMC, 2019, p. 2).

Online Learning Platforms: Obstacles and Solutions

EMC gathers several of the most influential European platforms in different languages: *FutureLearn*, *EduOpen*, *FUN*, *Miríadax* and *OpenupEd*. For example, *FutureLearn* is a global learning platform based in the United Kingdom. It offers more than 60 micro-credentials in various areas of fast-growing industries and this qualification, in some cases, leads to the recognition of academic credits towards a degree. Several world universities, leading among them those from the UK and Australia, present courses that last 1-15 weeks and educate interested students in areas such as Climate Change and Solutions, Business and Management, Innovation and Leadership, various IT skills and others (see FutureLearn, 2023, par. 2).

Users of micro-credentials face the obstacle of offering active courses with free certificates. That number is often decreasing, and the choice of very expensive courses is increasing. More than their current offerings, the question of who provides the resources to attend credentialing courses remains unclear (Werquin, 2023).

In some cases, this can be overcome by using online platforms with appropriate low-cost or free courses (Miríadax in Spanish). Another way is the distribution of vouchers to participants in educational training in which micro-qualifications (micro-credentials) are acquired, especially for digital and green skills (Agency for Science and Higher Education, Croatia). In Germany, it is possible to apply micro-credentials for adults over 25 years old to obtain a vocational qualification (Hippach-Schneider & Le Mouillour, 2022).

The increasing offer of online courses and educational platforms at the international level is not surprising. The post-pandemic period has helped universities to develop their distance learning programmes and also for students to engage in them. Professionals in various fields of activity, from teaching professions to industrial and commercial experts, are increasingly involved in digital forms of learning.

Recent Developments in Adult Education

The EAEA Annual Conference held in Zagreb in June 2023 considered, among other things, the ways in which micro-credentials could help in the professional development of adult educators. One of the key conclusions from this conference states that in European countries, micro-credentials are used at institutions of higher education (Hungary), and in others only as workplace learning in adult education (Estonia) (EAEA, 2023).

Tamás Harangozó, from the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN), says that it will only be seen in the future to what extent Europe will approach micro-credentials. "In vocational education and training (VET), it may be more difficult to adopt microcredentials in some countries where VET systems are rather inflexible and somewhat chaotic," he added. When asked whether micro-credentials can be recognised and valued in adult learning systems in

various countries, Harangozó gives the following answer: “For adult learning programmes it may be more up to employers’ reception and judgement just how much value they see into using for example digital badges”. He then pointed out the importance of the *EBSN Professional Development Series* for the professional development of basic skills trainers. It was launched to support adult educators working with people with low basic skills. In order to achieve this, a series of eight-week online courses have been designed that develop methods and techniques for basic literacy, digital learning and teaching, basic skills and more. Participants who successfully complete the course can be awarded with a digital certificate or EBSN badge for that course. “It is also an ambition of the partnership to establish Microcredentials [...] also be recognised by different educational institutions as well as national or regional authorities taking an active role in further education and professionalisation of adult basic skills teachers” (EBSN, 2023, par. 1).

Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability was adopted in 2022 and considers that micro-credentials should help individuals to acquire and supplement knowledge and new skills “while not replacing traditional qualifications” (CEU, par. 5). Additionally, it makes the bold claim that “micro-credentials can play a role in delivering on the EU’s headline targets to be achieved by 2030, including a target of 60 % of all adults participating in training every year and an employment rate of at least 78 %” (CEU, par. 7). Some European countries feel that they can fit the emergence of micro-credentials into their national qualifications frameworks. “The French national qualifications framework is flexible enough to accommodate new devices such as microcredentials” (Werquin, 2023, p. 7).

Towards the Future in the National Context

Almost a decade ago, it was pointed out that Serbian higher education institutions could organise non-formal learning processes through part-time credit courses for adults or master programmes for the needs of employers (Babić-Kekez, 2014). For instance, in Serbia some subject teachers do not have the necessary knowledge in methodology, pedagogy or psychology. The Singidunum University in Belgrade organises training in a distance learning context for such teachers. Depending on whether the teacher already has experience in teaching or not — the programme is completed in three to four months. After completing the training, the participant receives a paper certificate that is nationally recognised in primary and secondary schools. This context clearly fits into the narrative of micro-credentials, except that it is not named as such (Marentič & Mustar, 2023; Werquin, 2023). In adult education in Serbia, the term *(micro)qualification* is rarely used as a substitute term for the word *(micro)credential*.

For the moment, Serbia does not have a clearly established mechanism for effectively determining the required skills and new job positions in various economic sectors. Popular global trends are generally followed, without any real initiative to adapt existing human and structural resources. The survey on adult education from 2016 showed that the participation rate of adults in some form of formal or informal education or training was 19.8%, which is significantly below the average of 45.1% in the EU (Republic Institute of Statistics, Serbia, 2018). Promotion and adequate valuation (for instance, salary increase) of professional training and continuous learning could encourage the development and use of micro-credentials.

Conclusion

Context and content for the use of micro-credentials in Europe already exist. For instance, the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN) has made significant steps towards the implementation

of micro-credentials in education. In general, the offer of courses with micro-credentials is among the most represented in the field of higher education, adult education or professional development of teachers. The value of micro-credentials is that they are increasingly acquired online by obtaining a certificate in digital form. The impact of international education policies is visible in those systems that are adjustable. However, it is important to understand that micro-credentials are not substitutes for established national education systems.

There is no clear indicator for which direction the development of micro-credentials will continue. A more pragmatic approach to them is needed and the support of competent authorities is necessary. The funding of national and joint EU programmes to implement new skill-based learning activities is a frequently discussed issue. Playing the card of green transition and the realisation of the digital economy could prevail in the integration of micro-credentials in Europe, at least at the level currently present in Anglophone countries.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank colleagues from Europe, especially Ana Anakijev, Tamás Harangozó and Balázs Németh, for their help in the form of professional and personal insight into this topic.

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Cite as: Šarčević, I. (2024). A new agenda on micro-credentials: Filling the gaps in the European approach. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 11(1), 181-186.