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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to
micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability
- Adoption

1. The Education Committee has examined the above proposal for a Council Recommendation at several meetings. The text now meets with the agreement of all delegations.
2. The Permanent Representatives Committee is therefore asked to confirm the Education Committee's agreement on the text set out in the annex and to submit it to the Council for adoption and subsequent publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.

Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 149 and 292, 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

1. Within Europe, a growing number of people need to update and improve their knowledge, skills and competences to fill the gap between their formal education and training and the needs of a fast-changing society and labour market. The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital and green transitions have accelerated the pace of change in how we live, learn and work. They have also highlighted the need for people to be better equipped to deal with current and future challenges. The pandemic has affected the career prospects of both young people and adults. It has also increased unemployment and damaged the physical, mental and emotional well-being of hundreds of millions of people in Europe.

2. One of the major challenges facing European businesses and employers is an insufficient supply of relevant skills in the EU labour market. Simultaneously, workers are facing unprecedented changes in how work is organised. In addition, task profiles and skills requirements are changing fundamentally due to the digital and green transitions. As outlined in Council Decision (EU) 2021/1868 of 15 October 2021 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States¹, ‘Member States and the Union are to work towards developing a coordinated strategy for employment and particularly for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce, as well as labour markets that are future-oriented and responsive to economic change’. Continuous upskilling and reskilling are essential for workers to respond to the needs of their current job or to transition to new jobs and expanding sectors, such as the green and digital sectors, in particular in the context of demographic ageing.
3. People need access to quality teaching and learning provided in different ways and settings, to develop their personal, social, cultural and professional knowledge, skills and competences. There have been calls for education and training systems to become more flexible and to find solutions to deliver more learner-centred, accessible and inclusive learning to a wider range of profiles. Non-formal providers of education and training are also addressing this need by providing new and innovative opportunities for upskilling and reskilling.

¹ OJ L 379, 26.10.2021, p. 1.

4. An effective culture of lifelong learning is key to ensuring that everyone has the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive in society, the labour market and their personal lives. It is essential that people can access quality and relevant education and training, upskilling and reskilling throughout their lives. Lifelong learning opportunities should be part of the long-term strategy of education and training institutions to improve their responsiveness to the fast-changing needs of employers and learners. This would enable a more diverse body of learners (including graduates of these institutions and other adult learners) to upskill and reskill. It is recommended that higher education institutions, vocational education and training (VET) institutions, adult learning providers and other providers of micro-credentials, including employers, cooperate and integrate the latest research findings in the design and update of learning opportunities.
5. Micro-credentials could help certify the outcomes of small, tailored learning experiences. They make possible the targeted, flexible acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences to meet new and emerging needs in society and the labour market and make it possible for individuals to fill the skill gaps they need to succeed in a fast-changing environment, while not replacing traditional qualifications. They can, where appropriate, complement existing qualifications, providing added value while not undermining the core principle of full degree programmes in initial education and training. Micro-credentials could be designed and issued by a variety of providers in different learning settings (formal, non-formal and informal learning settings).
6. Despite their increasing use, 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.

7. In its first principle, the European Pillar of Social Rights² states that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable people to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in the labour market, everywhere in the European Union. The fourth principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve their employment or self-employment prospects. This right to assistance includes the right to receive support for training and re-qualification. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan refers to micro-credentials as an innovative instrument that ‘can facilitate flexible learning pathways and support workers on their job or during professional transitions’. 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 %. Both these targets were welcomed by EU leaders, social partners and civil society, at the Porto Social Summit and then by the European Council at its meeting on 24-25 June 2021³.
8. In parallel to the Action Plan, the Commission adopted a Recommendation on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (the ‘EASE’ Recommendation)⁴. The Recommendation offers concrete policy guidance to Member States on developing coherent policy packages to ease job transitions and foster a job-rich recovery from COVID-19. The policy guidance covers upskilling and reskilling opportunities and support measures.

² OJ C 428, 13.12.2017, p. 10.

³ ‘[...] the European Council welcomes the EU headline targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, in line with the Porto Declaration’, European Council conclusions, 24-25 June 2021, EUCO 7/21.

⁴ C(2021) 1372 final.

9. The European Skills Agenda⁵ announced, among its 12 flagship actions, a new initiative on a European approach to micro-credentials. This new initiative aims to support the quality, transparency and uptake of micro-credentials across the EU. The Skills Agenda also announced an initiative on individual learning accounts that could help close existing gaps in access to education and training for working age adults and enable people to manage labour market transitions successfully. Micro-credentials can be used as part of the education and training made available to people to underpin the operation of these individual learning accounts.
10. The Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025⁶ announced that the Commission will work to develop a European approach to micro-credentials to help widen learning opportunities and strengthen the role played in lifelong learning by both higher education institutions and VET institutions.
11. The Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience⁷ calls on the Commission to ‘explore the concept and use of micro-credentials’.
12. The Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)⁸ presents the exploration of the concept and use of micro-credentials as one of the concrete issues and actions for priority area 2 of the strategic framework (Lifelong learning and mobility).

⁵ COM(2020) 274 final.

⁶ COM(2020) 625 final.

⁷ OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1.

⁸ OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1.

13. The Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education⁹ stress that ‘although not deviating from and undermining the core principle of full degree programmes, micro-credentials could help widen learning opportunities to accommodate non-traditional learners and the demand for new skills in the labour market; make the learning experience more flexible and modular; support access to higher education; and engage learners, regardless of their previous qualifications or backgrounds, promoting reskilling and upskilling opportunities, while ensuring quality education’.
14. Ministers for Education of the European Higher Education Area committed in the Rome Communiqué of the inter-governmental Bologna Process¹⁰ to help their higher education institutions to: (i) diversify their learning offer; and (ii) innovate in educational content and modes of delivery. In addition to full degree programmes, and while preserving their right to design study programmes and to regulate questions of credit transfer independently, many higher education institutions offer or plan to offer smaller units of learning. These smaller units can help learners to develop or update their cultural, professional, and transversal skills and competences at various stages in their lives. Cooperation under the Bologna Process will explore how, and to what extent, these smaller, flexible units of learning – including those leading to micro-credentials – can be defined, developed, implemented and recognised by using common tools.

⁹ OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 14.

¹⁰ Rome Ministerial Communiqué of 19.11.2020.

15. Education and training systems should cater for the diverse individual needs, abilities and capacities of all learners. They should also offer learning opportunities to all, including in non-formal and informal settings as underlined by the Council conclusions on equity and inclusion in education and training in order to promote educational success for all¹¹. Well-designed micro-credentials can be used as part of targeted measures to support inclusion and accessibility to education and training for a wider range of learners. This wider range of learners includes disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities, the elderly, low-qualified/skilled people, minorities, people with a migrant background, refugees and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their socio-economically disadvantaged situation). Micro-credentials can also be used to help better orient students and facilitate access to and success in learning and training and support the school-to-work transition. The expected growth in the number of refugees and asylum applicants will require the development of strategies to effectively integrate these groups into education, training and labour systems. Guidance and mutual learning across the EU in relation to the design and issuance of micro-credentials can foster inclusion and ensure that learners from all groups of society can access their benefits.

¹¹ OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 3.

16. Micro-credentials can also support the professional development and mobility of workers, including people in non-standard forms of work, such as those in the platform economy¹², who may have difficulties accessing training depending on their employment status¹³.
17. Micro-credentials could play an active role in delivering on EU policy initiatives to advance the digital and green transitions. Micro-credentials could: (i) underpin the goals of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027¹⁴ to help provide flexible, accessible learning opportunities for digital skills; and (ii) deliver on the targets of the Commission's '2030 Digital Compass' plan to develop a digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals in Europe by 2030. Micro-credentials could also play a role in delivering on the European Green Deal¹⁵, which is Europe's growth strategy aiming to transform its economy and society and put them on a more sustainable path.
18. The Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning¹⁶ provides a common reference framework to help people and organisations compare both different qualification systems and the levels of qualifications from those systems. As a European reference framework, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is open to all types and levels of qualifications and represents the common standard reference for transparency, portability and comparability. The EQF is also open to micro-credentials if and where they are first included in national qualifications frameworks.

¹² '[...] the notion of the online platform economy should be understood to cover all economic activity arising out of actual or intended commercial transactions in the internal market and facilitated directly or indirectly by online platforms, in particular online intermediation services and online search engines', Commission Decision of 26.4.2018 on setting up the group of experts for the Observatory on the Online Platform Economy, C(2018) 2393 final, 26.4.2018, p. 1.

¹³ European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 on fair working conditions, rights and social protection for platform workers – new forms of employment linked to digital development (2019/2186(INI)) called for the education and training of platform workers to be addressed in the context of the EU approach to micro-credentials.

¹⁴ COM(2020) 624 final.

¹⁵ COM(2019) 640 final.

¹⁶ OJ C 189, 15.6.2017, p. 15.

19. The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning¹⁷ invited Member States to put in place by 2018 – according to national circumstances and specificities and as they deem appropriate – arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning. These arrangements for validation mean that people can have validated the knowledge, skills and competences which they have acquired through non-formal and informal learning. These arrangements for validation also enable people to obtain a full qualification or, where applicable, a partial qualification. The 2020 evaluation of the Recommendation¹⁸ called for greater development of the links between validation and micro-credentials.
20. Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC¹⁹ sets out the basis for providing web-based tools enabling people to manage their career and lifelong learning with authentication services for credentials which make micro-credentials portable.
21. The relevance, development and updating of micro-credentials depends on:
- i) cooperation and collaboration between regional and national authorities, education and training organisations and;
 - ii) sectoral and cross-industry social dialogue (this social dialogue should involve organisations that represent workers and employers from both the private and public sectors, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and professional and managerial staff).

¹⁷ OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

¹⁸ SWD (2020) 121 final.

¹⁹ OJ L 112, 2.5.2018, p. 42.

22. This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of education and vocational training in accordance with national circumstances, and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders.
23. This Recommendation is without prejudice to Directive 2005/36/EC as amended by Directive 2013/55/EU on the recognition of professional qualifications and the regime of automatic recognition provided therein,

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION to be implemented in accordance with regional, national and Union legislation and priorities, national circumstances and available resources, including the socio-economic situation and the characteristics of national education, training, lifelong learning and employment systems, and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders:

Objectives

1. Member States are recommended to adopt a European approach to micro-credentials with the objective of:
 - a) enabling individuals to acquire, update and improve the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive in an evolving labour market and society, to benefit fully from a socially fair recovery and just transitions to the green and digital economy and to be better equipped to deal with current and future challenges;
 - b) supporting the preparedness of providers of micro-credentials to enhance the quality, transparency, accessibility and flexibility of the learning offering in order to empower individuals to forge personalised learning and career pathways;
 - c) fostering inclusiveness, access and equal opportunities and contributing to the achievement of resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all, in a context of demographic and societal changes and throughout all phases of economic cycles.

2. Member States are recommended to use micro-credentials, where appropriate, as a tool to strengthen and complement existing learning opportunities, increase participation in lifelong learning and help reach the target of 60 % of all adults participating in training every year as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and as welcomed by EU leaders and approved by the Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030²⁰.

Scope

3. This Recommendation covers micro-credentials, as well as policies that can support their effective design, issuance and use.
4. Micro-credentials can be used to complement and enhance education, training, lifelong learning and employability ecosystems. The measures outlined in this Recommendation are aimed at strengthening opportunities for learning and employability without disrupting initial, higher education, vocational education and training (VET) systems, and without undermining and replacing existing qualifications and degrees. The measures recommend the establishment of a common European approach to the ongoing and emerging provision of micro-credentials in the European Union and set out a definition and guidance for the design, issuance and description of micro-credentials to improve their quality and transparency and facilitate their uptake.

²⁰ OJ C 504, 14.12.2021, p. 9.

Definitions

5. For the purposes of this Recommendation, the following definitions apply:
- a) ‘Micro-credential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences 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 stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.
 - b) ‘Providers of micro-credentials’ means education and training institutions and organisations, social partners (i.e. organisations representing workers and employers), employers and industry, civil society organisations, public employment services (PES) and regional and national authorities, and other types of actors designing, delivering and issuing micro-credentials for formal, non-formal and informal learning. This is without prejudice to regional and national legislation and circumstances.
 - c) ‘Learning settings’ means the diverse, physical, online, blended²¹, virtual and digital locations, contexts and cultures in which people learn, encompassing all settings in which formal, non-formal and informal learning can occur.

²¹ ‘Blended learning’ in formal education and training is the term used to describe when a school, educator or student takes more than one approach to the learning process.

- d) ‘Formal learning’ means learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma; it includes systems of general education, initial, continuing and tertiary vocational education and training and higher education²².
- e) ‘Non-formal learning’ means learning which takes place outside formal education and training through planned activities in terms of learning objectives and learning time and where some form of learning support is present²³.
- f) ‘Informal learning’ means learning resulting from daily activities and experiences which is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner’s perspective²⁴. It does not automatically lead to a micro-credential but can be considered in the context of validation arrangements which may identify, document, assess and/or certify an individual’s learning outcomes.
- g) ‘Portability’ means the ability for a credential-holder to store their micro-credentials in a system of their choice, to share the credential with a party of their choice (whether national or transnational) and for all parties in the exchange to be able to understand the content and verify the authenticity of the credentials. This enables portability between and within education and training sectors, in the labour market and across countries.

²² Definition taken from Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

²³ Definition taken from Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, OJ L 189, 28.05.2021, p. 1.

²⁴ Definition taken from Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, OJ L 189, 28.05.2021, p. 1.

- h) ‘Stackability’ means the possibility, where relevant, to combine different micro-credentials and build logically upon each other. Decisions to ‘stack’ or combine credentials lie with the receiving organisation (e.g. education and training institutions, employers, etc.) in line with their practices and should support the goals and needs of the learner. Stacking does not create an automatic entitlement to a qualification or a degree. Such decisions are made by regional and national authorities or institutions in line with their awarding processes.
- i) ‘Assessment’ means the process or method used to evaluate, measure and eventually describe the learning outcomes acquired by individuals through formal, non-formal or informal settings. Assessment is performed by the provider or other recognised assessment providers.

Definition and European standard elements to describe a micro-credential

- 6. Member States are recommended to adopt and promote the use of:
 - a) the definition of micro-credentials as set out in paragraph 5(a);

- b) the European standard elements to describe a micro-credential (as described in Annex I) including the following mandatory elements:
- i) identification of the learner
 - ii) title of the micro-credential
 - iii) country(ies)/region(s) of the issuer
 - iv) awarding body(ies)
 - v) date of issuing
 - vi) learning outcomes
 - vii) notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS, wherever possible)
 - viii) level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (European Qualifications Framework, Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area), if applicable
 - ix) type of assessment
 - x) form of participation in the learning activity
 - xi) type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential
- c) the European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials (as described in Annex II).



Development of the ecosystem for micro-credentials

7. Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to facilitate the ongoing and emerging development of micro-credentials within formal learning settings, including by:
 - a) supporting the exploration by higher education institutions of the role of micro-credentials in offering learning opportunities to diverse learners, in particular by widening an attractive, accessible, inclusive and learner-centred offer of lifelong learning activities, including through the activities of the alliances of ‘European Universities’²⁵, where applicable;
 - b) supporting the exploration by vocational education and training institutions and other VET providers of the role of micro-credentials in continuing vocational education and training in supporting upskilling and reskilling of adults, including through the activities of VET Centres of Vocational Excellence, where applicable;
 - c) considering providing public funding, according to national circumstances, for the development and provision of small education and training activities leading to micro-credentials at all levels of education and training, while taking into account institutional autonomy to allow for diversity and creativity.

8. Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to support the ongoing and emerging development of micro-credentials within non-formal and informal learning settings, including by:
 - a) supporting the design and issuance of micro-credentials by providers other than those in paragraph 7 (these providers might include: companies, social partners, civil society organisations, local authorities, community centres, professional associations, research and innovation organisations and private providers), including promoting diversity of funding sources;

²⁵ OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 14.

- b) promoting the development of micro-credentials designed and agreed by employers' and workers' representatives through social dialogue, where appropriate;
 - c) considering adapting procedures for the recognition of prior learning and the validation of non-formal and informal learning to allow for the awarding of micro-credentials.
9. Member States are encouraged to support the quality and transparency of micro-credentials, where appropriate, including by:
- a) applying, adapting and developing quality assurance mechanisms for micro-credentials issued by different types of providers, making use of existing mechanisms, wherever possible (see Annex 2);
 - b) supporting the use of 'skills-intelligence' systems for analyses of labour market needs and demographic changes so they can identify any need to develop or update micro-credentials;
 - c) encouraging providers to publish catalogues of micro-credentials they offer, including, where relevant, their policy on the recognition of micro-credentials issued by other providers;
 - d) integrating micro-credentials in national qualifications frameworks and systems.
Decisions to integrate micro-credentials in regional and national frameworks or systems are made by national authorities or institutions in line with national circumstances.

10. Member States are encouraged 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.

This experimentation, cooperation, governance and partnership is important for identifying needs for micro-credentials, co-developing micro-credentials, and updating micro-credentials, as well as for assessing the impact on upskilling and reskilling, lifelong learning and career development.

Delivering on the potential of micro-credentials

11. Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to integrate micro-credentials into both education and training systems and skills policies, including by:

- a) encouraging the inclusion of education and training offers leading to micro-credentials in catalogues of education and training opportunities that are on offer;
- b) using micro-credentials to improve access to education and training for all learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities, the elderly, low-qualified/skilled people, minorities, people with a migrant background, refugees and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their socio-economically disadvantaged situation), where appropriate;

- c) using micro-credentials to support flexible learning pathways and the transition from upper secondary or VET to tertiary education and adult education where relevant;
- d) using micro-credentials that can be integrated in or that can complement degree programmes, where relevant;
- e) using micro-credentials as a further means to improve basic and advanced digital skills and competences of a wider range of learners, in line with the Digital Education Action Plan and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan;
- f) using micro-credentials to support the development of learning for the green transition and sustainable development as part of the national implementation of the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development;
- g) promoting the use of micro-credentials by education and training institutions and other providers – in cooperation with their surrounding knowledge and innovation ecosystem – to boost the relevance and increase the potential positive impact of micro-credentials on the economy at local and regional level;
- h) promoting the understanding and use of micro-credentials through continuing professional development for teachers and trainers, guidance counsellors (e.g. in the context of the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies), as well as academics, researchers and other related staff;
- i) promoting the use of micro-credentials for the prompt transfer of the latest research findings into learning opportunities, strengthening synergies between the European Education Area and the European Research Area;

- j) exploring the use of micro-credentials in the European Education Area to challenge gender and other discriminatory stereotypes concerning study choices and within educational practices and materials.
12. Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to integrate micro-credentials into their employment policies and active labour market policies (i.e. employment services, training support and employment incentives), including by:
- a) using micro-credentials, as relevant, to:
 - i) address skills mismatches and bottlenecks in given economic sectors and regions and
 - ii) upskill and reskill workers for skills and jobs that are in demand on the labour market, in particular in the context of the digital and green transitions.
 - b) including training leading to micro-credentials in recognised training opportunities that may be linked to individual learning accounts, where they exist, and other systems for training support;
 - c) promoting the use of micro-credentials as a means of updating and upgrading the skills of self-employed and non-standard workers, including people working through platforms and SMEs;
 - d) exploring the use of micro-credentials in targeted initiatives to support and motivate disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as minimum income recipients, people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed and the low-qualified) to re-enter the labour market or continue in employment;

- e) exploring a role for micro-credentials within systems for implementing the reinforced Youth Guarantee to support young people, including in preparatory training and good-quality offers of continued education or training;
 - f) exploring the role of micro-credentials as part of the national implementation of the Recommendation on an effective active support to employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE);
 - g) exploring the use of micro-credentials to support the professional development of workers and meet mandatory requirements for upskilling and reskilling in certain jobs and types of work (e.g. for licences, required training and permits).
13. Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to encourage and support the European Network of National Information Centres and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (ENIC-NARIC networks) or adequate bodies to develop, where relevant, transparent recognition procedures for micro-credentials issued by different types of providers. This should be done in cooperation with the relevant stakeholders mentioned in paragraph 10, including through exploring the possible feasibility of automatic recognition of micro-credentials²⁶.
14. Member States are recommended, where relevant, to ensure that information and advice on identifying and selecting micro-credentials is incorporated into lifelong learning guidance services. This includes guidance services at higher education institution career centres, PES, private employment services, social services and other guidance services (employment, career, education and training, coaching). Incorporating guidance on micro-credentials in these services should serve the needs of all learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.

²⁶ As defined in the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1.

15. Member States are recommended, where appropriate, to:
- a) define measures by building on relevant existing national arrangements and financial frameworks to implement this Recommendation. This could include links with individual learning accounts where they exist (with due regard for the responsibility and autonomy of education, training and labour-market organisations in the national context).
 - b) make best use of Union funds and instruments to support the necessary reforms, from the enabling framework to the development and use of micro-credentials.

Commission support

The Council welcomes the Commission's intention, with due regard for subsidiarity and national circumstances and in close cooperation with Member States, to:

16. develop and adapt, where relevant, existing Union tools and services to support the development of micro-credentials by all types of providers, including by:
- a) supporting the development of guidelines on how to foster transparency and apply the current EU and Bologna instruments in the field of higher education to the internal and external quality assurance of micro-credentials;
 - b) exploring how to adapt the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System user guide in the field of higher education to integrate micro-credentials;
 - c) exploring how to adapt and develop EU tools for skills and qualifications to integrate micro-credentials into VET systems;
 - d) fostering the role of ENIC-NARIC and other adequate bodies in the recognition of micro-credentials for further studies and/or employment purposes including by developing guidance and training;

- e) supporting structured discussion on the possibility to include micro-credentials in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs);
 - f) exploring the development of the European Student Card initiative to allow students to share the outcomes of micro-credentials obtained abroad during their studies, in a secure way with other education and training institutions.
17. support cooperation between Member States and stakeholders including by:
- a) supporting sharing of information between regional and national authorities on relevant regional and national policy initiatives and evidence on their impact, making best use of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond;
 - b) promoting European cooperation on quality assurance of micro-credentials, thus building reciprocal trust;
 - c) incentivising experimentation with and use of micro-credentials by higher education institutions and vocational education and training institutions, including the alliances of ‘European Universities’ and VET Centres of Excellence to promote and encourage the uptake of micro-credentials by the wider education and training community;
 - d) promoting engagement on micro-credentials in Erasmus+ Teacher Academies and other providers of teacher education and teacher training to address teachers’ needs for continuous professional development, where appropriate;
 - e) exploring engagement on micro-credentials by social partners, employers and industry, including via the Pact for Skills and linked cooperation initiatives such as the Blueprint for sectoral cooperation on skills, the strengthened European Alliance for Apprenticeships and the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition;

- f) supporting cooperation and exchange of best practices between PES and employers on how to use micro-credentials to support employability in the context of the PES Network;
 - g) facilitating co-operation projects among social partners and education and training institutions on how to use and implement micro-credentials to meet skills needs at European, national, local and regional level, and across different sectors.
18. support the technical implementation of the Recommendation by exploring further developments in the Europass platform to provide where relevant:
- a) information on learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials and on providers that adhere to the European approach to micro-credentials;
 - b) support for authentication of micro-credentials through European digital credentials for learning;
 - c) support for the portability, stackability, interoperability, exchange and sharing of information on micro-credentials through a European open standard which specifies a common format for micro-credentials.

19. support further research on:
- i) the uptake of the European approach to micro-credentials, including on their use by education and training providers, employers and social partners;
 - ii) particular outcomes and benefits for learners;
 - iii) their added value compared to and as a complement to full degrees or qualifications and;
 - iv) further evidence on the factors that influence people's incentives and motivation to take up training.
20. Member States and the Commission should jointly work on improving the scope and relevance of existing data collection on micro-credentials at Union level.

Reporting

21. It is recommended that Member States implement this Recommendation as soon as possible. They are invited to inform the Commission by December 2023 of the corresponding measures to be taken at the appropriate level to support the objectives of this Recommendation.
22. The Commission is invited to monitor the progress made in the implementation of this Recommendation via existing relevant Union monitoring and reporting frameworks, without any additional burden for Member States, in cooperation with them and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, and to report to the Council within five years from the date of its adoption.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council

The President

ANNEX I

European standard elements to describe a micro-credential

This annex includes a list of common European standard elements to describe micro-credentials recommended as a resource to support implementation²⁷.

Mandatory elements:	Identification of the learner
	Title of the micro-credential
	Country(ies)/Region(s) of the issuer
	Awarding body(ies)
	Date of issuing
	Learning outcomes
	Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS credits, where 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
Optional elements, where relevant (non-exhaustive list)	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 (stand-alone, independent micro-credential/integrated, stackable towards another credential)
	Further information

²⁷ The use of the European standard elements to describe micro-credentials does not, in itself, imply official validation or recognition, but is a key enabler for it.

These standard elements will be included in a European data model²⁸ that specifies a common format for describing micro-credentials. The data model will be available as an open standard to be used by providers of micro-credentials, where relevant, and could support interoperability and easier exchange of data on micro-credentials.

The Commission will develop the data model based on the common standard elements listed above. It will develop this data model in line with:

- i) consultation with Member States and stakeholders;
- ii) user needs and technological advancements;
- iii) changes in labour markets and;
- iv) existing approaches to providing education and training.

This data model aims to support consistency of information and demonstrate clear added value. The data model for micro-credentials will be governed as per the Europass Decision, in particular Articles 6(1)(b), 6(1)(d), and 6(2)(b), which already call on the Commission to develop, test and update open standards.

²⁸ Data models are graphical and/or lexical representations of data, specifying their properties, structure, and inter-relationships. They are used as open standards, are free to use, transparent, and built based on consensus.

European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials

The 10 principles presented below specify the nature of micro-credentials and offer guidance to Member States, public authorities and providers on the design and issuance of micro-credentials and systems for micro-credentials. The principles highlight the key characteristics of the European approach to micro-credentials that can enable the trust and quality of micro-credentials. The principles are universal and may be applied in any area or sector, if appropriate.

1	Quality	Micro-credentials are subject to internal and external quality assurance by the system producing them (e.g. the education, training or labour market context in which the micro-credential is developed and delivered). Quality assurance processes must be fit-for-purpose, clearly documented and accessible and meet the needs and expectations of learners and stakeholders.
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		<p>Providers: External quality assurance is based primarily on the assessment of providers (rather than individual courses) and the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance procedures.</p> <p>Providers should make sure that internal quality assurance covers all the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the overall quality of the micro-credential itself, based on the standards referred to below; • the quality of the course, where applicable, leading to the micro-credential; • learners’ feedback on the learning experience leading to the micro-credential and; • peers feedback, including other providers and stakeholders, on the learning experience leading to the micro-credential. <p>Standards: External quality assurance is to be conducted in line with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annex IV of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation, where applicable; • the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, where applicable; • the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (the EQAVET Framework) in the field of vocational education and training, where applicable; • other quality assurance instruments, including registries and labels, to build public trust in micro-credentials, where applicable.
2	Transparency	<p>Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable and understandable, with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant.</p> <p>Workload</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education institutions should use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and comply with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation, where possible, to demonstrate the notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes of the micro-credential.

- Providers that do not use the ECTS may use other systems or types of information that can effectively describe learning outcomes and workload, in compliance with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation.

Qualifications framework/systems

- Micro-credentials may be included in national qualifications frameworks/systems, where relevant, and in line with national priorities and decisions. National qualifications frameworks/systems are referenced to the European qualifications framework and, for higher education qualifications, self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area, which can further support the transparency of, and trust in, micro-credentials.

Information on the offer of micro-credentials

Systems for micro-credentials should provide transparent and clear information, to underpin guidance systems for learners, in line with national practices and stakeholders needs:

- Information on providers of micro-credentials is published where possible in existing relevant registers. Higher-education providers (and other relevant providers) should be included, where possible, in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), based on quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);
- Information on learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials should be accessible and easily exchanged through relevant platforms, including Europass.

3	Relevance	<p>Micro-credentials should be designed and issued as distinct, targeted learning achievements and learning opportunities leading to them are to be updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs.</p> <p>Collaboration between education and training organisations, employers, social partners, other providers and users of micro-credentials is encouraged to increase the relevance of the micro-credentials for the labour market.</p>
4	Valid assessment	<p>Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent criteria.</p>
5	Learning pathways	<p>Micro-credentials are designed and issued to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to validate, recognise and ‘stack’ micro-credentials from across different systems.</p> <p>Stackability</p> <p>Micro-credentials are designed to be modular so that other micro-credentials may be added to create larger credentials. Decisions to ‘stack’ or combine credentials lie with the receiving organisation (e.g. education and training institutions, employers, etc.), in line with their practices, and should support the goals and needs of the learner.</p> <p>Stacking does not create an automatic entitlement to a qualification or a degree. Such decisions are made by regional and national authorities or institutions in line with their awarding processes.</p> <p>Validation of non-formal and informal learning</p> <p>Obtaining micro-credentials is possible following assessment of learning outcomes, obtained either through a specific course leading to a micro-credential, or on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes resulting from non-formal and informal learning.</p>

6	Recognition	<p>Micro-credentials have a clear signalling value of learning outcomes for smaller modules of learning. Recognition paves the way for a wider offer of such learning experiences in a comparable way across the EU.</p> <p>Micro-credentials are recognised, where possible, by the competent authorities, for academic, training or employment purposes, based on the information provided according to the European standard elements (Annex I) and the principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials (Annex II).</p> <p>When micro-credentials are issued by formal education providers, they are recognised, where possible, based on standard recognition procedures used in recognising foreign qualifications and learning periods abroad.</p> <p>This is without prejudice to the right of the competent authorities to define recognition procedures or to verify the authenticity of documents.</p>
7	Portable	<p>Micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner) and may be stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets (e.g. Europass), in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. The infrastructure for storing data is based on open standards and data models. This ensures interoperability and seamless exchange of data, and allows for smooth checks of data authenticity.</p>
8	Learner-centred	<p>Micro-credentials are designed to meet the needs of the target group of learners. Learners are involved in the internal and external quality assurance processes and their feedback is taken into account as part of the continuous improvement of the micro-credential.</p>

9	Authentic	Micro-credentials contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credential-holder (learner), the legal identity of the issuer, the date and place of issuance of the micro-credential.
10	Information and guidance	Information and advice on micro-credentials should be incorporated in lifelong learning guidance services and should reach the broadest possible learner groups, in an inclusive way, supporting education, training and career choices.
