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Proposal for a

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

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

{SWD(2021) 367 final}

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<u>**EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM**</u>

1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

- **Reasons for and objectives of the proposal**

In the Commission political guidelines[1], Commission President Ursula von der Leyen states her intention "to bring down barriers to learning and improve access to quality education", calling the relevance of inclusion and quality in lifelong learning as proclaimed in the European Pillar of Social Rights[2]. Subsequently, the Commission proposed a strategy to help people develop skills in a rapidly changing labour market and announced a new initiative on micro-credentials in the European Skills Agenda[3] (July 2020). In the Communication on achieving a European Education Area by 2025[4] (September 2020), the Commission announced a proposal for a Council recommendation to support building trust in micro-credentials across Europe. The Communication said that the recommendation would aim to ensure all the necessary steps for micro-credentials were in place by 2025. An action on a European approach to micro-credentials is therefore included in the Commission's 2021 Work Programme[5] under the headline ambition "Promoting our European way of life"[6]. The proposal for a Council Recommendation on micro-credentials is presented together with the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts.

(1) Challenges to be addressed by the proposed recommendation:

In Europe, people need to continually update their knowledge, skills and competences to fill the gap between their education and training and the demands of a rapidly changing labour market.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to rapid growth in demand for short, tailored learning opportunities[7]. This demand for new forms of learning has led to a corresponding increase in interest in 'micro-credentials' that certify the outcomes of these small learning experiences.

This demand is expected to continue during the recovery from the pandemic and in the years that follow. The green and digital transitions, facilitated by the Next Generation EU funding programme, have also created new demand from learners, workers and job-seekers seeking to upskill and reskill. These learners, workers and job seekers wish to ensure their employability and career progression. They also wish to access further studies and to learn for their own personal development.

Learning opportunities of smaller volume than for traditional qualifications are being developed rapidly across Europe and the world by a wide variety of public and private providers in response to a demand for more flexible, learner-centred forms of education and training. Such education and training can be described as both lifelong and 'life wide' and takes place in different settings (at work, at home, among people who are already in work, and among those not currently in work[8]). Micro-credentials enable the targeted, flexible acquisition and recognition of knowledge, skills and competences to meet new and emerging needs in society and labour market. Importantly, micro-credentials do not replace traditional

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[1]   https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf
[2]   https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf
[3]   https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223#upskilling
[4]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625
[5]   https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/2021_commission_work_programme_en.pdf
[6]   https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/2021_commission_work_programme_en.pdf
[7]   Cedefop, 2020. Coronavirus boosts interest in online learning
[8]   OECD (2021), "Micro-credential innovations in higher education: Who, What and Why?", OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 39, OECD Publishing, Paris

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qualifications. Instead, they can complement traditional qualifications and serve as a lifelong learning opportunity to all. Given their flexibility, micro-credentials can be designed and delivered by a variety of providers in many different formal, non-formal and informal learning settings.

To date, there is a no common definition of micro-credentials and there is a lack of standards to describe and recognise them. This causes concerns about their value, quality, recognition, transparency and 'portability' (portability between and within education and training sectors, portability on the labour market and portability across countries)[9]. This limits the trust, understanding, wider acceptance and uptake which in turn limits the potential of micro-credentials to support flexible learning and career pathways.

Micro-credentials can also be used as part of targeted measures to support inclusion and facilitate access to education and training and career opportunities 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 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 in targeted ways to address challenges within education and training systems and labour markets, including gender and other discriminatory stereotypes (e.g. concerning study choices and within education practices and materials), to support smoother school-to-work transitions.

Objective and scope of the proposal:

In general, the Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on micro-credentials will contribute to implementing Principles 1 and 4 of the European Pillar of Social Rights by widening learning opportunities for all and facilitating more flexible learning pathways throughout life, as well as supporting the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects, including the right to receive support for training and re-qualification.

Specifically, the proposal aims to:

- enable people to acquire the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive in an changing labour market and society, so they can benefit fully from both a socially fair recovery from COVID-19 and just transitions to the green and digital economy;

- support the preparedness of providers of micro-credentials to enhance the flexibility of the learning offer in order to empower people to forge personalised learning and career pathways;

- foster inclusiveness and equal opportunities, contributing to the achievement of resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all, in a context of demographic change and throughout all phases of economic cycles.

To achieve these objectives, the proposal for a Council recommendation sets out a European approach that recommends Member States to:

- apply a common EU definition, standards and key principles for the design, issuance and portability of micro-credentials;

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[9]   European Commission. (2020). [Final report: A European approach to micro-credentials](). Output of the Micro-credentials Higher Education Consultation Group

- develop the ecosystem for micro-credentials;

- deliver on the potential of micro-credentials to support lifelong learning and employability.

The goal is for micro-credentials to be developed, used and compared in a coherent way among Member States, stakeholders, and the different providers (from education and training institutions to private companies) across different sectors, fields and countries.

The proposal aims to support the ongoing work on micro-credentials by Member States, stakeholders and diverse groups of providers across the EU. The proposal offers key resources and guidance for those providers, and others interested in exploring micro-credentials. These key resources and guidance will support the value, quality, recognition, transparency, portability and uptake of micro-credentials in a consistent and coherent way. They will therefore contribute to a culture of lifelong learning and increase the employability of people.

The proposal fully respects the diversity and flexibility of micro-credentials. For this reason, the proposal does not suggest to create new systems or types of micro-credentials. It seeks to support readiness of Member States and providers to: (i) deliver on the potential of micro-credentials to improve lifelong learning and (ii) make the most of existing tools to develop micro-credentials.

The proposal does not aim to substitute existing national processes in organising education and training, employment, or labour markets. Micro-credentials complement them. Moreover, the proposal for a Council recommendation builds on (and recommends adapting, where necessary) existing rules on administrative processes and governance mechanisms at national and institutional levels (e.g. in terms of quality assurance and recognition processes).

- **Consistency with existing policy provisions in the policy area**

The proposed Council recommendation is aligned with and complements other Union initiatives that address lifelong learning and employability.

Following up on the Communication on achieving a European Education Area by 2025[10] and the European skills agenda[11], the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan[12], adopted on 4 March 2021. This 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 or life transitions". Micro-credentials will also play a key role in helping to achieve the 2030 target of 60% of all adults participating in training every year. This is one of the three EU headline targets that were welcomed by EU leaders at the Porto Social Summit[13] in the Porto Declaration[14] of 8 May 2021 and the European Council conclusions[15] of 25 June 2021.

The proposal for a Council Recommendation on micro-credentials will be adopted simultaneously with the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts. The objective of both actions is to empower individuals to develop skills and receive recognition of them throughout their lives.

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[10] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625
[11] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223#upskilling
[12] C(2021) 102 https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en
[13] The Porto Declaration, Press Release: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/the-porto-declaration/
[14] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/the-porto-declaration/
[15] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/50763/2425-06-21-euco-conclusions-en.pdf

The Commission also adopted a Commission Recommendation 'Effective Active Support to Employment following the COVID-19 crisis' (The "EASE" Recommendation)[16]. This Recommendation sought to facilitate job-to-job transitions and a job-rich recovery from COVID-19, notably by supporting opportunities for upskilling and reskilling. In this context, short training courses, notably those certified by micro-credentials, can play an important role in increasing the employability of workers.

In its Resolution of 18 February 2021 on "a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)"[17], the Council calls for:

"strengthening the key role of higher education and VET systems in supporting lifelong learning and reaching out to a more diverse student body. Exploring the concept and use of micro-credentials can help widen learning opportunities and could strengthen the role of higher education and VET in lifelong learning by providing more flexible and modular learning opportunities, and offering more inclusive learning paths".

In its Council Conclusions on equity and inclusion in education and training in order to promote educational success for all[18], the Council invites the Member States to:

"encourage the provision of learning opportunities for all learners to engage in flexible education and training pathways throughout life, including through the validation of prior learning, including within non-formal and informal settings and flexible approaches, including by exploring the concept and use of a European approach to micro-credentials, while not undermining the core principle of full degree programmes in initial education and training".

It also emphasises that 'higher education […] can also further engage adults, promote upskilling and reskilling, and play a role in lifelong learning through flexible alternatives to full programmes, by exploring the concept and use of a European approach to micro-credentials'.

In the Council conclusions on the European universities initiative[19], the Council invites the Commission and the Member States to 'jointly explore the necessary steps to enable to test the use of micro-credentials in higher education in order to help widen learning opportunities and to strengthen the role of higher education institutions in lifelong learning'.

Adopted on 24 November 2020, the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience[20] calls on the Commission to 'explore the concept and use of micro-credentials, including in vocational education and training (VET), together with Member States and relevant stakeholders, including in the context of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group, as proposed in the European Skills Agenda'.

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[16]   C(2021) 1372 final
        https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2021.080.01.0001.01.ENG
[17]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG
[18]   OJ C 221, 10.6.2021 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021XG0610(01)
[19]   OJ C 221, 10.6.2021 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49659/st08658-en21.pdf
[20]   OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1
        https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020H1202%2801%29

2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY

• **Legal basis**

The proposed Council Recommendation is in conformity with Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)[21].

Article 165(1) of TFEU lays down that the Union is to 'contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems'. Article. 165(2) of TFEU further specifies that Union action in education will be aimed, in part, 'at encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study'.

Article 166(1) of TFEU says that the Union is to 'implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training'.

Article 149 combined with Article 292 TFEU establishes the legal basis for a coordinated strategy on employment and for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce. Article 149 foresees the adoption of 'measures designed to encourage cooperation between Member States and to support their action in the field of employment through initiatives aimed at developing exchanges of information and best practices, providing comparative analysis and advice as well as promoting innovative approaches and evaluating experiences, in particular by recourse to pilot projects'.

This proposal fully respects the responsibility of the Member States for organising their own education and training systems (including the content of teaching, and their cultural and linguistic diversity) and organising employment and labour markets. This proposal reflects the supplementing and supporting role of the EU, and the voluntary nature of European cooperation in these systems. The initiative fully respects Union competences.

• **Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)**

This proposal seeks to support and improve the ongoing exploration and development of micro-credentials in Member States, in full respect of the principle of subsidiarity, as provided for in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), by leaving decisions on scale and form of implementation to the Member States.

Member States are fully and primarily responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education, training and employment and labour market systems. However, micro-credentials vary greatly across national and sectoral boundaries with differing approaches to their definition, format and other characteristics. Common approaches to developing and using micro-credentials at EU level can support and enhance national efforts. These common approaches can also build trust among Member States and stakeholders. It is therefore important that these common approaches are agreed upon, thus avoiding a proliferation of definitions and standards for micro-credentials that would hamper their quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition and portability across the EU's single market.

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[21] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012E%2FTXT

An EU initiative in this area is also warranted to enable upward socio-economic convergence across the economic and monetary union and the EU more broadly. As the demand for skills changes rapidly within and across sectors, some of them being significantly affected by the green and digital transition, increasing access to training opportunities can also improve the resilience of labour markets to shocks such as the one induced by COVID-19.

- **Proportionality**

The present proposal is in conformity with the principle of proportionality as provided for in Article 5(4) TEU.

Neither the content, nor the form of this proposed Council recommendation exceeds what is necessary to achieve its objectives. The actions proposed are proportional to the pursued objectives as they respect Member States' practices and the diversity of national systems. Moreover, any commitments by Member States are voluntary in nature and each Member State remains free to decide on which approach to take. The proposal supports the exploration of micro-credentials already underway in a number of Member States. The proposal accommodates a differentiated approach that reflects Member States' different economic, financial and social situations and their different education, training, employment and labour market systems.

- **Choice of instrument**

To achieve the objectives referred to above, the TFEU, notably in its Articles 165(4), 166(4), 149 in combination with 292, provides for the adoption by the Council of recommendations, based on a proposal from the Commission. A Council recommendation is an appropriate instrument within the fields of education, training, employment and labour markets, where the EU has a supporting responsibility. It is an instrument that has been frequently used for EU action in these areas. As a legal instrument, a Council recommendation signals the commitment of Member States to the measures included and provides a strong political basis for cooperation in these areas, while fully respecting Member State authority.

3. **RESULTS OF EX-POST EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS**

- **Ex-post evaluations/fitness checks of existing legislation**

Not applicable.

- **Stakeholder consultations**

The European Commission conducted an extensive consultation exercise during 2020 and 2021 to gather stakeholders' views. After collecting initial feedback from experts in the field, 53 targeted consultations events were conducted in 2020 and 2021 to ensure the participation of all interested stakeholders and members of the public.

An important phase in this consultation exercise was the open public consultation from April to July 2021, which received more than 500 contributions from 43 countries, and more than 90 position papers.

Throughout this consultation process, the European Commission was committed to assessing national and EU efforts to develop micro-credentials.

Overall, across all stakeholder categories there was general agreement on the need to develop a European approach to micro-credentials. However, competing interests and perspectives appeared in relation to a variety of aspects such as: (i) the working definition of micro-credentials; (ii) quality assurance and flexibility; and (iii) the role of micro-credentials.

The definition of micro-credentials that the Commission submitted to consultation was supported by a large majority of the stakeholders. Some suggestions included referring to micro-credentials as 'small volumes of learning' instead of 'short learning experiences' in order to free the definition of any link to a period of time. The proposed standard component to describe a micro-credential were also well received by most of respondents, who considered each of the proposed standard as either essential or recommended.

The stakeholders considered that proposing a coherent approach to micro-credentials at EU-level was the primary role of the Union in this context. Stakeholders also considered it especially appropriate for the EU to ensure fair and transparent recognition processes and provide a clear definition of micro-credentials.

• **Collection and use of expertise**

The proposal is based on a wide range of reports and studies on upskilling and reskilling. The proposal also considers the impact of COVID-19 and the digital and green transitions on education and training systems and employability. Specific input was provided for this initiative by: (i) the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; (ii) the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training; (iii) the European Training Foundation; (iv) relevant Erasmus+ projects; (v) a report prepared by the Network of Experts working on the Social dimension of Education and Training (NESET) and (vi) the report of a consultation group on the role of micro-credentials in higher education. This information is included in the accompanying staff working document

• **Impact assessment**

An impact assessment was not carried out given: (i) that the activities complement Member State initiatives; (ii) the voluntary nature of the proposed activities; and (iii) the scope of the impacts expected. The development of the proposal was informed by dedicated studies, consultation with Member States, a public consultation and many dedicated stakeholder consultations.

The accompanying staff working document describes a wide range of recent research evidence together with European stakeholder opinions and experiences to support the proposed recommendation. The staff working document also provides examples of existing policies and projects in this rapidly developing field.

• **Regulatory fitness and simplification**

Not applicable.

• **Fundamental rights**

This proposed Council recommendation respects the fundamental rights. It promotes the principles recognised by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union[22], namely the right to education, the right to have access to vocational and continuing education (Article 14), and the right to the protection of personal data (Article 8).

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[22]   OJ C 326, 26.10.2012 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012P%2FTXT

4.   BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

This initiative will not require additional resources from the EU budget.

5.   OTHER ELEMENTS

•   **Implementation plans and arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and reporting**

To support implementation, the Commission proposes to develop, in cooperation with Member States, specific guidance material, handbooks and other concrete deliverables. This will be based on evidence, peer-learning activities and identified good practice. It will be recommended to Member States that they implement the principles set out in the recommendation as soon as possible and that they submit a plan setting out the corresponding measures they will take at national level. The Commission intends to report on the use of the recommendation via relevant Union monitoring and reporting frameworks.

•   **Explanatory documents (for directives)**

Not applicable.

•   **Detailed explanation of the specific provisions of the proposal**

The recommendation proposes guidance and actions that can be pursued by Member States to enhance the quality, transparency and take-up of small learning experiences leading to micro-credentials. The proposal outlines a set of recommendations to Member States, in line with national priorities and circumstances. The proposal also invites the Commission to support Member States and stakeholders, in particular by facilitating co-operation and developing practical guidance and tools to support the development and use of micro-credentials. The recommendation also sets out the European Commission's commitment to complement and support Member State actions in this area.

§ 1-2 recommends that Member States adopt a European approach to micro-credentials to: (i) widen learning opportunities for people; support the preparedness of providers of micro-credentials; and (iii) foster inclusiveness and equal opportunities. Micro-credentials will also 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.

§ 3-4 makes clear that the scope of the proposal is to set up a common European approach to providing micro-credentials. This common approach will involve a definition of micro-credentials and guidance for how to design, issue and describe micro-credentials.

§ 5 includes definitions for the purpose of the recommendation.

§ 6 recommends that Member States adopt 'Union standard' elements to describe a micro-credential and Union principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials as set out in Annexes I and II.

§ 7-10 sets out actions to develop 'ecosystems for micro-credentials' within the evolving education and training systems, labour markets and society.

§ 11-15 makes recommendations on the uses of micro-credentials within education and training systems, skills policies, and employment and active labour market policies that can serve the needs of a wide range of learners, workers, job seekers and others so they can

benefit fully from both a socially fair recovery from COVID-19 and the just transitions to the green and digital economy.

In addition, the proposal suggests promoting the use of micro-credentials to help certain target groups to re-enter the labour market, notably minimum income recipients, the long-term unemployed; and the low-qualified. It also suggests promoting the use of micro-credentials for self-employed and platform workers who may not be able to access traditional education and training, but who need targeted support to advance in their careers. Micro-credentials can also be used to recognise the outcomes of mandatory or required training for certain jobs and professions e.g. first aid, manual handling, and operating machinery for specific jobs and professions[23].

§ 16-19 welcomes the Commission's intention to support the development and use of micro-credentials by: (i) developing or adapting EU tools and services; (ii) supporting cooperation between Member States and stakeholders; (iii) developing the Europass platform; and (iv) supporting further research on the uptake of the European approach to micro-credentials.

Implementation will be underpinned through existing EU tools that support the needs of individuals and organisations, including Europass and the Europass digital credentials for learning to support the portability and authenticity of micro-credentials. Implementation will also be underpinned through the European student card initiative which will allow students to share the outcomes of micro-credentials electronically and securely with other education and training institutions. Finally, EU funding programmes and instruments will help to facilitate the uptake of short learning experiences leading to micro-credentials.

§ 20-22 sets the reporting mechanisms for implementing the recommendation.

The accompanying staff working document describes a wide range of recent research evidence together with European stakeholder opinions and experiences to support the proposed recommendation. The staff working document also provides examples of existing policies and projects in this rapidly developing field.

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[23] This proposal does not address recognition of regulated professions as laid down in Directive 2005/36/EC.

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 their knowledge, skills and competences to fill the gap between their formal education 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. The pandemic has damaged 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 the right skills in the EU labour market. Simultaneously, workers face 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 the Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies[24], the Member States 'should enable everyone to anticipate and better adapt to labour market needs notably through continuous reskilling and upskilling'. This is 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 competences. Education and training systems have been called on to become more flexible and 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 up-skilling and reskilling.

(4) An effective culture of lifelong learning is key to ensure that everyone has the skills 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, up-skilling 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

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[24] OJ L 344 19.10.2020 p.4

other adult learners) to upskill and reskill. Higher education institutions, VET institutions, and other providers of micro-credentials must cooperate to quickly apply the latest research findings in the design and update of learning opportunities.

(5) Micro-credentials can help certify the outcomes of these 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, while not replacing traditional qualifications. Micro-credentials can be designed and delivered by a variety of providers in different learning settings (whether these settings be formal, non-formal or informal).

(6) Despite their increasing use, there is no common definition or standards for micro-credentials in Europe. This limits the understanding and uptake of micro-credentials, and thereby undermines the potential of micro-credentials to facilitate flexible learning and career pathways.

(7) The European Pillar of Social Rights[25] states in its first principle 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 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 on 25 June 2021[26].

(8) In parallel to the Action Plan, the Commission adopted a Recommendation on 'Effective Active Support to Employment following the COVID-19 crisis' (the 'EASE' Recommendation)[27]. This Recommendation offers concrete policy guidance to Member States to develop 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.

(9) The European Skills Agenda[28], 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 take-up of micro-credentials across the EU. The skills agenda also announced an initiative on individual learning accounts to help close existing gaps in the access to training for working age adults and enable people to successfully manage labour market transitions. Micro-credentials can be used as part of the training made available to people to underpin the operation of these individual learning accounts.

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[25] OJ C 428, 13.12.2017, p.3.
[26] "The European Council welcomes the EU headline targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, in line with the Porto Declaration", Council of the European Union (2021), European Council conclusions, 24-25 June 2021. EUCO 7/21.
[27] C(2021) 1372 final.
[28] C(2020) 274 final.

(10) The Communication on achieving a European Education Area by 2025[29] 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 VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience calls on the Commission to 'explore the concept and use of micro-credentials'.

(12) 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 education[30] stress that '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'.

(13) Ministers for Education of the European Higher Education Area committed in the Rome Communiqué of the inter-governmental Bologna process[31] to help their higher education institutions to: (i) diversify their learning offering; and (ii) innovate in educational content and modes of delivery. In addition to full degree programmes, many higher education institutions offer or plan to offer smaller units of learning. These smaller units will enable learners to develop or update their cultural, professional, and transversal skills and competences at various stages in their lives. Cooperation within 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.

(14) 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[32]. 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 prevent early leaving from education and training and support the school-to-work transition. The expected growth in numbers of refugees and asylum applicants will require the development of strategies to effectively integrate these groups within education, training and labour systems. Guidance and mutual learning across the EU in the design of micro-credentials can foster inclusion and ensure that learners from all groups of society can access their benefits.

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29   C(2020) 625 final.
30   OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p.9.
31   Rome Ministerial Communiqué of 19.11.2020
32   OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p.8

(15) Micro-credentials' can also support the professional development and mobility of people in non-standard forms of work, such as those in the platform economy[33]. People working through platforms have little access to training due to their self-employed status.

(16) Micro-credentials can play an active role in delivering on EU policy initiatives to advance the digital and green transition. Micro-credentials can: (i) underpin the goals of the updated Digital Education Action Plan[34] 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 can also play a role in delivering on 'The European Green Deal'[35] which is Europe's growth strategy aiming to transform its economy and society and put them on a more sustainable path.

(17) The Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Lifelong Learning[36] 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 EQF is open to all types and levels of qualifications. The EQF is also open to micro-credentials that are included in national qualifications frameworks.

(18) The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on validation of non-formal and informal learning[37] invited Member States to put in place by 2018 - according to national circumstances and specificities and as they deem appropriate - , arrangements to validate non-formal and informal learning. These arrangements for validation mean that people can have the knowledge, skills and competences, which they acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated. These arrangements for validation also enable people to obtain a full qualification - or, where applicable, a partial qualification. The 2020 evaluation of the Recommendation[38] called for greater development of the links between validation and micro-credentials.

(19) 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)[39] sets out the basis for providing web-based tools for people to manage their career and lifelong learning with authentication services for credentials which make micro-credentials portable.

(20) The relevance, development and updating of micro-credentials depends on: (i) cooperation and collaboration between national authorities, education organisations 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).

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[33]   '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' C(2018) 2393 final, 26.4.2018, p.1

[34]   C(2020) 624 final

[35]   C(2019) 640 final

[36]   OJ C 189, 15.6.2017

[37]   OJ C 398, 22.12.2012

[38]   SWD(2020) 121 final

[39]   OJ L 112, 2.5.2018

(21)   This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

Objectives

1.   Member States are recommended to adopt a European approach to micro-credentials with the objective of:

    (a)   enabling individuals to acquire 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;

    (b)   supporting the preparedness of providers of micro-credentials to enhance the transparency and flexibility of the learning offering in order to empower individuals to forge personalised learning and career pathways;

    (c)   fostering inclusiveness and equal opportunities and contributing to the achievement of resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all, in a context of demographic change and throughout all phases of economic cycles.

2.   Members States should use micro-credentials as a tool to help reaching 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.

Scope

3.   This Recommendation covers micro-credentials, as well as the policies that can support their effective design 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 do not seek to replace or disrupt, initial, higher education, vocational education and training (VET), or traditional qualifications. The proposal establishes a common European approach to the ongoing and emerging provision of micro-credentials in the European Union and sets out a definition and guidance for the design, issuance and description of micro-credentials to facilitate their quality, transparency and uptake.

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 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.

    (b)   'Providers of micro-credentials' means any actor, including education and training institutions and organisations, social partners (i.e. organisations representing workers and employers), employers and industry, civil society organisations and national authorities, designing, delivering and issuing micro-credentials for formal, non-formal and informal learning.

(c)   'Learning settings' means the diverse physical, online, blended[40], virtual and digital locations, contexts, and cultures in which people learn, encompassing all settings in which formal, non-formal and informal learning can occur.

(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 and tertiary vocational training and higher education.[41]

(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 present. [42]

(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 perspective.[43]

(g)   'Portability' means the ability for a credential-holder to store their micro-credential 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 of and verify the authenticity of the credential.

(h)   'Stackability' means the possibility to combine different micro-credentials and build logically upon each other.

(i)   'Assessment' means the process or method used to evaluate, measure and eventually describe the skills of individuals acquired through formal, non-formal or informal settings. Assessment can be certified by a third party, the learner himself- or herself (self-assessment), or both.

Definition and Union Standard Elements to describe a micro-credential

6.   Member States should adopt:

(a)   the definition of micro-credentials as set out in paragraph 5(a);

(b)   the Union standard elements to describe a micro-credential (as described in Annex I) including the following mandatory elements:

(1)   identification of the learner

(2)   title of the micro-credential

(3)   country/Region of the issuer

(4)   awarding body

(5)   date of issuing

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[40]   '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.

[41]   Definition taken from Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning OJ C 398, 22.12.2012

[42]   Definition taken from Regulation of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport OJ L 189 28.05.2021

[43]   Definition taken from Regulation of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport OJ L 189 28.05.2021

(6) learning outcomes

(7) notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, wherever possible)

(8) 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

(9) type of assessment

(10) form of participation in the learning activity

(11) type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential

(c) the Union principles for design and issuance of micro-credentials (as described in Annex II).

Development of the eco-system for micro-credentials

7. Member States should 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 to offer learning opportunities to diverse learners, in particular by widening an attractive, inclusive and learner-centred offer of lifelong learning activities, including through the activities of the European universities Alliances[44];

(b) supporting the exploration by VET providers of the role of micro-credentials in continuing VET to support upskilling and reskilling of adults, including through the activities of VET Centres of Vocational Excellence;

(c) ensuring the availability of public funding for the development and provision of small education and training programmes leading to micro-credentials, at all levels of education and training, while taking into account the institutional autonomy to allow for diversity and creativity.

8. Member States should support the ongoing and emerging development of micro-credentials within non-formal and informal learning settings, including by:

(a) supporting the delivery and design of micro-credentials, including through the availability of public funding, by providers other than those under paragraph 7, (these providers include: companies, social partners, civil society organisations, local authorities and private providers);

(b) promoting the development of micro-credentials designed and approved by employers' and workers' representatives through social dialogue;

(c) adapting procedures for recognition of prior learning and 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, including by:

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[44] OJ C 221, 10.6.2021

(a) applying, adapting and developing quality assurance mechanisms for micro-credentials issued by different types of providers;

(b) supporting the use of 'skills-intelligence' systems to analyses of labour market needs and demographic changes so they can identify any needs to develop or update micro-credentials;

(c) ensuring that providers 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, where relevant.

10. Member States should promote and support effective cooperation, governance and partnerships between: (i) education and training institutions; (ii) social partners; (iii) employers and industry; (iv) civil society organisations; and (v) national authorities. This cooperation, governance and partnership should identity needs for micro-credentials, co-develop micro-credentials, and update micro-credentials.

Delivering on the potential of micro-credentials

11. Member States should integrate micro-credentials into both education and training systems and skills policies, including by:

(a) including micro-credentials in national catalogues of education and training courses 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);

(c) using micro-credentials to support the transition from upper secondary or VET to tertiary education and the completion of degree programmes;

(d) 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;

(e) using micro-credentials to support the development of learning provision in environmental sustainability, as part of the national implementation of the Council Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability;

(f) 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 positive impact of micro-credentials on the economy of their cities and regions;

(g) promoting the understanding and use of micro-credentials through continuing professional development for teachers and trainers (e.g in the context of the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies), as well as academics and researchers;

(h) 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;

(i) 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 should integrate micro-credentials into their employment policies and Active Labour Market Policies (i.e. employment services, training support and employment incentives), in particular by:

(a) using micro-credentials 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 courses leading to micro-credentials in national registries of recognised training opportunities that may be linked to individual learning accounts and other systems for training support;

(c) promoting the use of micro-credentials as a means to update and upgrade the skills of self-employed and non-standard workers, including people working through platforms;

(d) exploring the use of micro-credentials in targeted initiatives to support and motivate disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as minimum income recipients, the long-term unemployed and the low-qualified) to re-enter the labour market;

(e) exploring a role for micro-credentials within systems to implement the 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 Effective Active Support to Employment following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE);

(g) exploring the use of micro-credentials to meet regulatory requirements for upskilling and reskilling in certain jobs and types of work (e.g. for licences, mandatory training and permits).

13. Member States should support the European National Information Centre (ENIC-NARIC) network to develop recognition procedures for micro-credentials issued by different types of providers, including through exploring the possibility of automatic recognition of micro-credentials[45].

14. Member States should ensure that information and advice on identifying and selecting micro-credentials is incorporated within lifelong learning guidance services, where relevant. This includes guidance services at university career centres, public employment services (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.

15. Member States should:

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[45] As defined in the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad

(a) define measures by building on relevant national arrangements and financial frameworks to implement this Recommendation. This should include measures with both national resource allocations as appropriate and links with individual learning accounts (with due regard to 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 development and use of micro-credentials. This includes the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU), the European Social Fund Plus, Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, the European Regional Development Fund, InvestEU, Horizon Europe, Interreg Europe, Digital Europe, the Just Transition Mechanism, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the Modernisation Fund and requesting tailor-made expertise through the Technical Support Instrument;

Commission support

The Council welcomes the Commission's intention to:

16. Develop and adapt, where relevant, existing Union tools and services to support 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 users' 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 ENIC-NARICs role in the recognition of micro-credentials for further studies and/or employment purposes including by developing guidance and training;

(e) developing guidance notes on how to include micro-credentials in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs).

(f) supporting the development of the European student card initiative to allow students to share the outcomes of micro-credentials electronically in a secure way with other education and training institutions.

17. Support cooperation between Member States and stakeholders including by:

(a) promoting European cooperation on quality assurance of micro-credentials;

(b) incentivising the use of micro-credentials by the European universities alliances and VET Centres of Excellence to promote and encourage the uptake of micro-credentials by the wider education and training community;

(c) promoting engagement on micro-credentials in Erasmus+ Teachers' Academies and other providers of teacher education and teacher training to address teacher's needs for continuous professional development.

(d) promoting engagement on micro-credentials within the pact for skills and linked cooperation initiatives including the blueprint for sectoral cooperation

on skills, the strengthened European Alliance for Apprenticeships and the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition;

(e) 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;

(f) facilitating co-operation projects among social partners 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:

(a) information on learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials and 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; and (iii) their added valuecompared to and in complement to traditional provision.

20. Member States and the Commission should jointly work on improving the scope and relevance of ongoing data collection on micro-credentials at Union level. This work should focus on: (i) the investments in adult learning in national accounts and budgets; and (ii) further evidence on the factors that influence people's incentives and motivation to take up training.

Reporting

21. Member States should implement this Recommendation as soon as possible and submit a plan by (insert date 12 months after adoption by Council) setting out the corresponding measures to be taken at national level to support the achievement of the objectives of the Recommendation by 2025.

22. The Commission should assess and evaluate the progress made in implementing this Recommendation via relevant Union monitoring and reporting frameworks, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, and report to the Council within 5 years from the date of its adoption.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council
The President

Brussels, 10.12.2021

COM(2021) 770 final

ANNEX 1

ANNEX

to the

Proposal for a Council Recommendation

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

{SWD(2021) 367 final}

EN   **EN**

ANNEX I

Union standard elements to describe a micro-credential

This annex includes a list of common Union standard elements to describe micro-credentials that can be used as a resource to support implementation.

Mandatory elements:	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
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 (standalone, independent micro-credential/integrated, stackable towards another credential)
	Further information

These standard elements will be included in a Union data model[1] that specifies a common format for describing micro-credentials. The data model will be available as an open standard

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

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to be used by providers of micro-credentials and will support interoperability and easier exchange of data on micro-credentials.

The Commission will develop the data model based on the common standard elements listed below. It will develop this data model: (i) in consultation with Member States and stakeholders; (ii) in line with user needs and technological advancements; (iii) in line with changes in labour markets; and (iv) in line with existing approaches to providing education and training. This data model must 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.

ANNEX

to the

Proposal for a Council Recommendation

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

{SWD(2021) 367 final}

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Union 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.

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, be clearly documented and accessible and meet the needs and expectations of learners and stakeholders.
		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.
		Providers should make sure that internal quality assurance covers all the following elements:
		• 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
		Standards: External quality assurance is conducted in line with:
		• 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;

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		• 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**	Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable and understandable with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant. **Workload** • 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, wherever 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, 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 should be published in registers, or incorporated into existing 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	Micro-credentials should be designed as distinct, targeted learning achievements and learning opportunities leading to them are updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs. 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.
4	**Valid assessment**	Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent standards.
5	**Learning Pathways**	Micro-credentials are designed to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to 'stack', validate and recognise micro-credentials from across different systems. **Stackability** 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. **Validation of non-formal and informal learning** 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.
6	**Recognition**	Recognition has a clear signalling value of learning outcomes for smaller modules of learning and paves the way for a wider offer of such learning experiences in a comparable way across the EU. Micro-credentials are recognised for academic or employment purposes based on standard recognition procedures used in recognising foreign qualifications and learning periods abroad, when dealing with micro-credentials issued by formal education providers.
7	**Portable**	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.
8	**Learner centred**	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.
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 location 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.