

Input for the Commission's consultation on micro-credentials

The Netherlands knowledge community, represented by the Netherlands house for Education and Research (Neth-ER), welcomes the Commission's upcoming European approach to micro-credentials for all education levels and the preparatory work done by the ad hoc expert group on micro-credentials and the MICROBOL project. With regard to the open consultation Neth-ER stresses the following:

Key messages:

- **Neth-ER believes micro-credentials will be necessary for the further development and implementation of the European Education Area (EEA).** Micro-credentials will play an increasingly important role in the creation of flexible pathways in education and hence support and promote lifelong learning. Especially in light of the green and digital transitions, innovative approaches for enabling re- and upskilling opportunities for professionals through micro-credentials are pertinent.
- **Diploma-oriented learning and the role of formal education providers remain at the foundation.** Thus, micro-credentials should be complementary to or an integral part of full degrees, without replacing them.
- A successful transition towards a culture of flexibility, inclusiveness and lifelong learning, with the use of micro-credentials, requires **sufficient financing and policy support at both the national and European level.** This calls for a reconsideration of the role of national governments and the European Commission with regard to continuous education.

For a successful rollout of the European approach, micro-credentials will need to meet the following conditions:

- **It is crucial for international recognition, and recognition within the EEA, that the educational component is firmly anchored in the entire validation and recognition process.** Micro-credentials should thus be aligned with the existing EU and Bologna instruments for recognition of qualifications, quality assurance and defining learning outcomes to ensure a common definition. Full implementation and a transparent use of these instruments is essential to assure mutual trust between systems. In the same vein however, further regulation should be approached cautiously, ensuring sufficient flexibility for education providers to swiftly respond to the needs of the labour market.
- **Connectivity and permeability between education sectors and systems is vital in the context of lifelong learning and requires coordination.** This means the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) should be further developed, ensuring a correct classification in terms of level of micro-credentials within the EQF.
- **The educational component of a micro-credential should be determined by education providers.** Education providers should be in charge of the learning content, scope, duration and appointed credentials of a module. Micro-credentials will need to address both the knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility dimension to constitute a valuable learning outcome.
- **While not replacing a full qualification within the EQF it should be possible to accumulate micro-credentials** into a larger credential or degree. Students following a degree or larger credential should be able to request a micro-credential for the courses/modules she/he has followed as part of this credential/degree, as it enhances flexibility and student mobility.
- Neth-ER aligns with the Commission's current working definition of a micro-credential. **The Commission should however, consider to include the scope of a micro-credential in the definition.**
- Neth-ER believes the lifelong learning market **should be as accessible as possible for learners from all education levels.** This means access to micro-credentials should have a low barrier to entry inclusion in lifelong learning by also reaching new learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and create the possibility for pathways easily progressing from one EQF level to the next.

Recommendations to the European Commission and national governments:

- **The European Commission and national governments should enable and finance policy experiments** as well as disseminate, share and upscale promising projects on European level. The pilot micro-credentials¹, initiated by the Netherlands Association for Universities (VSNU) and The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH) supported by the Dutch government and the project Edubadges² serve as good examples in this regard. However, as development of microcredentials on VET level is still in its early stages similar pilots should be facilitated to ensure adaptation time for the VET sector. Moreover, specific attention should be paid to financing the development of digital education infrastructures to prevent dependence on private actors in the lifelong learning market.
- **Commitment of the Commission and national governments to develop a system for micro-credentials is essential** to facilitate greater interoperability and mutual recognition between the various national education systems:
 - **Micro-credentials should be facilitated by national legislation** for the sake of mutual recognition of micro-credentials between national education systems and institutions.

¹ Pilot micro-credentials: <https://versnellingsplan.nl/zones/flexibiliseren/plan-van-aanpak/>

² Edubadges: <https://www.surf.nl/en/edubadges-issuing-digital-certificates-to-students>

Edubadges in the VET sector: <https://www.sambo-ict.nl/2020/12/het-programma-doorpakken-op-digitalisering-geeft-scho-len-de-kans-om-te-experimenteren-met-microcredentialing-en-meer-in-het-bijzonder-met-edubadges/>

- o **The Commission should consider setting up an entity or network that coordinates these efforts and brings national stakeholder networks together at EU level.** The nature and competences of this entity and the way in which existing initiatives as well as national and European entities collaborate should be determined in accordance with the specific objectives formulated to further develop micro-credentials on European and national level.
- o The European Commission and national governments should **keep in mind different starting points of the education sectors** in the design and implementation of the European approach. The Commission and national governments should ensure sufficient time and resources to develop micro-credentials and stimulate experimentation with pilots.
- **Neth-ER calls on the Commission for continuous stakeholder involvement** during the design and implementation of the European Approach, including student involvement through for example the European Student Union (ESU).
- **Neth-ER calls for a clear link with the European Commission initiative on Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs)** to support members states with expertise on the implementation of ILAs, such as Dutch STAP-budget³, as these have the potential to give a big impulse to stimulate learning for all, hence stimulating the uptake of micro-credentials.
- Micro-credentials serve the purposes of educational recognition as well as enhancement of employability of individuals. This requires **great coordination efforts between Directorate-Generals EMPL, EAC and other relevant DGs.**
- Micro-credentials for the enhancement of lifelong learning are **at the core of the strategy for many of the Erasmus+ European Universities alliances.** The networks have the potential to serve as testbeds, but clarity is needed from the Commission on the developments with regard to micro-credentials and how to deal with this issue in the alliances.
- **Neth-ER encourages the Commission to continue with the work on modernising the Europass portal:**
 - o The Europass Digital Credentials have great potential for issuing and receiving digital credentials. In issuing and receiving these credentials, a clear distinction should be made between micro-credentials and the status of other short-term and/or informal learning experiences that are not covered by the proposed definition of the Commission.
 - o The European Commission could in the future consider establishing a European digital platform, for example through Europass, to disclose offered micro-credentialled courses and/or modules.
- **Substantial flexibility within the elective parts of initial educational programmes at VET, bachelor's and master's level should be created to integrate units for micro-credentials.** It brings students and professionals together to study well defined current topics, creating a dynamic intergenerational learning environment for fulltime students, part-time students, alumni as well as staff.
- **Modules and/or courses for the lifelong learner should take the accessibility for working professionals into account.** Therefore, the design of a module and/or course should allow learners to combine work and study in an optimal way. Besides this, lifelong learning courses should be designed in an interdisciplinary approach to answer to the needs of the regional, national and international labour market and societal challenges.

³ Stimulating labour market position (STAP)- budget: <https://www.stap-budget.nl/>