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ETUCE Position on

The impact of micro-credentials on teachers and higher education

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Background

The European Commission will propose a recommendation to the Council on micro-credentials in the 4th quarter of 2021. In order to prepare this policy initiative, the European Commission issued the first phase of a public consultation which ran between 19 February and 19 March 2021 asking feedback on the Roadmap. The 2nd phase of the public consultation, entitled “Micro-credentials – broadening learning opportunities for lifelong learning and employability” asks feedback from the public on a questionnaire between 20 April 2021 and 13 July 2021.

The survey asks feedback also on the European Commission’s working definition of micro-credentials: “A *micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. The proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards.*”

ETUCE’s position

The green and digital transition of industries and the COVID-19 pandemic changes the labour market and increases the expectations of companies for new skills from formal general education and training and from teachers. Schools, education institutions and teachers are regularly blamed for the lack of skills of adults and skills mismatches. We underline that education is a **human right and public good**, it should prepare pupils and students for life and work. It cannot solely serve the permanently changing expectations of the labour market. It is important to ensure that all students have the right to acquire the basic skills, key competences and professional skills which enrich their life as democratic citizens and helps them to have quality jobs. It is necessary to differentiate between formal initial education which provides skills and competences for life and specific profession related further learning which happens periodically. Upskilling and reskilling of apprentices, young graduates, and employees and workers for the immediate needs of companies must be ensured and guaranteed by the employers themselves, and micro-credentials can be one of the forms to support skills development. At the same time sustainable public investment need to support free public adult education for the low-skilled, unemployed, and NEETs,

and their adult learning educators. Micro-credentials and modular approach of learning and teaching to full qualification should not be confused.

We are concerned that the European Commission's initiative on micro-credentials can deepen the process of **commercialisation of public initial education** and increase the involvement of the labour market in the field of education and the reduction of public control in the whole spectrum of education. In addition, as explained in the [Joint ETUC – ETUCE Position on Micro-credentials in VET and tertiary education \(July 2020\)](#) the initiative can restrict the rights of employees to access professional training, thus it can impact salaries and working conditions and increase the pressure on initial education and training to serve labour market needs. Within the [Joint ETUC – ETUCE Position](#) we emphasized that micro-credentials can be useful **in addition to full qualifications** which are placed within **national qualification frameworks**, but they should not be confused with partial or full qualifications. We welcome that the European Commission's [Roadmap](#) acknowledges these differences.

For education trade unions, the EU policy on micro-credentials is important from the perspective of ensuring that national qualification requirements for pursuing the teaching profession are respected and **academic freedom and institutional autonomy of higher education institutions** are safeguarded.

Teachers need to be supported with quality and updated initial education and continuous professional development. We underline that national education and training systems as well as national regulations and requirements for the **full qualification of teachers** must be respected. Courses leading to micro-credentials can be considered as continuous professional development but not replacement of the initial education of teachers.

ETUCE reminds the European Commission that micro-credentials should not be seen as tools of improving quality and inclusiveness of education and training and innovation within teaching and pedagogy. We request that the first principle of [the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) is implemented to ensure the right of all pupils and students to high quality and inclusive education and to access full qualifications. Such a right should also be guaranteed to teachers in order to access **quality and inclusive initial education and continuous professional development**. Innovation in pedagogy and teaching in higher education institutions must be achieved by providing **good salary, working conditions and continuous professional development to the higher education staff** instead of opening more lifelong learning courses for the labour market.

We remind that the European Commission's policy on micro-credentials should protect **academic freedom and the institutional autonomy** of universities. Academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of many higher education institutions have been under attack following cuts in public budget and increasing demands from the higher education institutions to serve **labour market needs**. Such pressure forces many universities to seek additional funding, often by providing short-term courses for companies. This pressure is there due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a high unemployment rate among young people, and the rise of inequality in society. ETUCE is concerned that the increasing policy focus on micro-credentials bears the risk that the **public funding** for universities be distributed in particular to for-profit private providers of micro-credential courses instead of supporting quality trainings organised by universities (short or long-term courses) which focus on the

needs of the students and learners. The European Commission should ensure that the EU policy on micro-credentials does not risk public funding dedicated to universities.

We do not agree with the European Commission that short-term courses such as the ones leading to micro-credentials can increase the “efficiency” of higher education institutions. Instead, **sustainable public investment, respect of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and ensuring decent salary and fair working conditions of the higher education and research staff** can ensure efficiency, quality and inclusiveness of higher education.

Indeed, the **quality standards** are not clear in relation to the provision of courses leading to micro-credentials. However, we underline the importance of **national competence** and subsidiarity on national education. Expanding the lifelong learning offers which issue micro-credentials in higher education should be decided by the national authorities, the education social partners and the higher education institutions. **In accordance with national and institutional needs**, micro-credentials issued by higher education institutions should be complementary to full qualification, be meaningful and of high quality. Their provision, assessment procedure, duration, and validity should be based on quality standards and the higher education institutions should indicate how the micro-credentials link to full qualifications in line with national and institutional regulations. ETUCE can support the European Commission’s working **definition of micro-credentials** if it mentions also that micro-credentials which are provided by higher education institutions and have ECTS credits should be awarded and recognised by higher education institutions only in accordance with the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG) and the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#). Micro-credentials in higher education need to respect the goals and fundamental values of the **Bologna Process** (EHEA) and the [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#), among them most importantly **academic freedom and institutional autonomy**.

ETUCE does not agree that the purpose of micro-credential courses be to improve the access of socially disadvantaged people to further learning within higher education. We are concerned that such an approach would increase **inequalities** between those who have access to full study programmes leading to full qualifications and between those who have the means (because many reasons, such as financial or family reasons) to access only the short-time lifelong learning courses. Equal access to full degree programmes must be ensured to all students, while enrolling to micro-credential courses should be voluntary. We are also concerned that more and more private higher education institutions open to the market of micro-credentials for high fee, making the micro-credentials courses more accessible to companies than for example for job seekers. This practice makes lifelong learning courses offered by higher education institutions less accessible for those in need.

Several higher education institutions provide trusted and recognised lifelong learning courses leading to micro-credentials, many times as a request of companies. These short courses can be attended by university students and added to a full qualifications, or they can be attended by any other person not enrolled as full-time student to the university. We underline that the provision of short labour market related courses should be **voluntary** for the higher education institutions and their control on their micro-credentials or lifelong learning courses should remain within the institution. The higher education institutions should decide if they want to give ECTS credits to the micro-credentials they deliver. Higher

education institutions can recognise micro-credentials issued by companies as part of validation of prior learning and if the national law and institutional procedures allow this. It is essential that the European Commission initiative on micro-credentials does not encourage governments to turn public VET schools and higher education institutions into certification centres to **recognise** the validity of courses carried out by private and online training institutions which lack quality controls. When private providers, including companies want micro-credentials be recognised by higher education institutions, then their courses should meet the quality assurance standards of the higher education system and the higher education institution.

There are diverse providers of courses leading to micro-credentials which can be both public institutions (eg. universities, adult learning providers) and private companies (eg. Google, Coursera). However, many times it is not clear which ones can be trusted and quality assured. It must be noted that already many private higher education institutions are expanding their offers of lifelong learning courses for companies for high fees. In addition, many of the **EdTech companies** provide courses not only for adults focusing on skills needed for the labour market but to young pupils to replace public education with private provision. The growth of such companies during the COVID-19 crisis further increases **privatisation** and marketisation of general education of pupils and the European Commission should pay attention to this. We echo the concerns of the OECD Education Director Andreas Schleicher who said that the “increasing digitisation of learning and the development of “micro credentials”—short online courses that provide students with a digital certification or a “badge” when complete—would see universities’ power in education decrease”.¹ **Strong universities**, however should be supported in order to achieve high quality and inclusive education for all learners.

We believe that **strict regulations** are essential to ensure the **quality assurance** of micro-credentials. Micro-credentials alone will not necessarily improve the recognition of learning outcomes by the employers and education institutions, and their quality is not guaranteed by online delivery. This is why we welcome that the European Commission plans to set up **European standards on micro-credentials and a list of trusted providers** with the involvement of the **social partners**. The use of a European common format of micro-credentials should be optional for the higher education institutions and be related to learning outcomes. The European standards on micro-credentials should respect **national quality assurance systems and institutional quality assurance procedures**. We underline the utmost importance of social dialogue with the education trade unions on this policy initiative which can have a significant impact on the education staff.

¹ Speech at the Education World Forum in London on 21 January, 2019
<https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-he-agencies-other-2019-micro-credentials-threaten-universities-says-oecd-director/>