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European Alliance for Micro-credentials – Strategic Plan

microVET

Introducing micro-credentials to the digital era of VET

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Project Information

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Introduction

The European labour markets are rapidly transforming, and the transition towards sustainable and digital approaches on multiple strategic sectors affects many dimensions of an EU citizen's reality, the need for more flexible training opportunities with recognised learning outcomes to effectively adjust to these changes is more than apparent. The EU introduced the concept of micro-credentials as a “proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short, transparently-assessed learning experience”. The benefits of micro-credentials adoption extend in various fields: they make training more inclusive as they are accessible to different types of learners (in terms of age, professional sector, academic attainment, etc.), they can be provided by different types of training providers (VET, HEIs, business actors, NGOs, etc.) to address specific needs of the labour market or/and of a particular target group, they facilitate comparable quality standards and recognition of learning outcomes.

The MicroVET consortium has worked on creating a wide offer of quality training opportunities that is aiming at addressing targeted needs and preferences, identified via multi-sectoral needs analysis, hence provide highly relevant and applicable training. During this work, appointed MicroVET Ambassadors were encouraged to engage with organisations and individuals that are already committed to or interested in microcredentials – as training providers or as those recognising the learning happening in courses leading to micro-credentials.

To extend both the attractiveness and impact of the micro-credential approach, the partnership aims to establish a transnational Alliance of relevant stakeholders that not only promotes the adoption of micro-credentials by training providers of any type, but it also supports its members in the development of high-quality results to increase overall impact and formalises a common framework of cooperation at a transnational level. The Alliance presented here is an inclusive opportunity for all interested parties to join their forces and create an active partnership for microcredentials, undertaking certain roles and responsibilities while also committing to support each other through the process. A wide variety of potential members have been and will be approached through both targeted and general dissemination activities, including VET centres and training organisations, higher education institutes, technical education institutes, business and commerce chambers, local/national/regional educational authorities, employment centres and employers, NGOs, social partners, certification and

accreditation bodies, municipalities and regional directorates, etc. Through the establishment of the European Alliance, the MicroVET partnership foresees to pave the way towards better permeability between education and training sectors and the labour market, allowing for increased employability and continuous reskilling and upskilling to contribute to better opportunities both at professional and personal level.

This strategy outlines the structure and planned operations of the Alliance at different stages of development from its soft launch in the summer of 2023 to its sustained operations well after the lifetime of the MicroVET project itself.

Stakeholder analysis

The European Alliance for Microcredentials is primarily a collaborative platform that advocates for the delivery and recognition of microcredentials as part of lifelong learning and as a usual element of continuous professional development – including informing the general public about microcredentials. As it is an advocacy platform, it is of utmost importance to identify and understand the target audiences and their needs/motives. In the current strategy, the stakeholder analysis is twofold. On the one hand, it has been necessary to identify the target audiences of the Alliance, namely potential members. On the other hand, this activity is also aiming at understanding the outreach of potential members in the general advocacy activities. The stakeholder status of potential members goes beyond their traditional advocacy “value”. The goal of the Alliance is to also actively influence how the European microcredentials landscape will look like in the near and more distant future.

In general, we are targeting policy makers for both membership and wider advocacy, ~~but~~ and by policy makers we mean everybody who makes decisions on policy from institutional to national and European level.

However, we need to consider that policy and decisions in general are made by people, not institutions. Therefore, strategic planning activities must be primarily targeted at individuals – representing certain institutions or being the decision/policy makers of them. In general, the current stakeholder analysis is giving MicroVET Ambassadors pointers with regards to the persons to approach for them and their institutions to either join the Alliance or become target of advocacy activities.

Additionally, it ~~was~~ is necessary to consider the role of different stakeholders that we approach answering the following two questions:

- Who has the authority to make the changes that need to be made? and
- Who influences these decision makers?

The EU Alliance for Microcredentials aims to invite members of both the decision maker and influencer groups to become members and will also target both groups with its communication. The opinion and actions of the latter group of individuals are important in achieving the general objectives, since they have the potential to affect the opinions and actions of the decision makers – both as supporters/ambassadors or as adversaries.

Decision-making is considered in relation to:

- The training offer leading to microcredentials,
- The labour market value and recognition of such training,
- Legislation around microcredentials including financial provisions,

- Formal structures around microcredentials to provide for certification, quality assurance and systemic inclusion in education systems, and
- Formal education recognising microcredentials as partial achievement towards more traditional degrees.

Initially, MicroVET Consortium listed the following groups of stakeholders as potential members of the Alliance and/or advocacy targets: VET centres and training organisations, higher education institutes, technical education institutes, business and commerce chambers, local/national/regional educational authorities, employment centres and employers, NGOs, social partners, certification and accreditation bodies, municipalities and regional directorates. This is a list to help identify stakeholders at various levels (from local to national and EU), but it also requires Ambassadors to understand their specific role and powers in the context of a certain country's education system or at the European stage.

In the graphics below, you can find a useful categorisation of various stakeholders according to their interest in and influence on the topic of microcredentials in their own context. For membership of the Alliance, we are looking at stakeholders with a high level of interest, keeping in mind that some of them may have a low level of influence. However, excluding them may lead to becoming hostile, thus they are important to be included. At the same time, they may become more influential over time.

Stakeholder Map: Who Needs What?



For each target group, the following simple questions are guiding what tools can be used for engaging them - as members of the Alliance or as advocacy targets:

1. What do they know about microcredentials in general and as an inclusion tool, or open schooling?

If you provide too basic information, that may be redundant, and you lose their interest.

If you do not ensure a common ground, it can cause problems later on.

2. What beliefs may influence them in supporting your goal?

What do they think about lifelong learning or learning digitally? What is their relation to and opinion about courses provided by non-formal education? How do they view the importance of certificates and degrees? What is their understanding of diverse education needs?

3. What personal interests can have an impact on their support?

Do they find it difficult to find people with the right knowledge, skills and competences? Are they true lifelong learners? Do they have children whose future work

they are concerned about? Are they up for re-election? Could it offer media coverage for them? – and other similar factors can have major influence.

4. What can be the impact of their support on your goals?

It is important to understand how their direct support can help you in implementing microcredentials, but it is equally important to see what might be the impact of their not doing anything or directly acting against your goals.

Building membership

Building the membership of the EU Alliance for Microcredentials will be a 4-step process:

- The first members will be the MicroVET project partners,
- In the second step, those providers will be approached who wish to share their courses as well as training providers who wish to offer and deliver courses included in the MicroVET Platform and asked to join the Alliance,
- In the third step, Ambassadors and MicroVET partners will approach VET provider organisations at national and European level, VET associations, chambers of commerce, policy makers, other providers of courses who are not yet sharing their content in the MicroVET Platform as well as those requiring and/or recognising microcredentials (that might also be course providers at the same time,
- In the final step, the active recruitment of members will be opened up to wider audiences.

As the MicroVET project has a limited funding period, and the coordinator, the European School Heads Association is a stakeholder that has a primary focus on formal education that does not include microcredentials providers, membership building also needs to focus on sustainability, namely finding members that are willing and able to take the management of the Alliance over after the summer of 2024. This means that the first year of membership building is crucial to build a solid base for the Alliance and its sustainable future in which member take ownership of the Alliance.

Launching the Alliance

The MicroVET partners have decided to launch the Alliance in the summer of 2023 to allow for a year for the Alliance to become a solid structure during the MicroVET funding period. This was also aligned with the building of the MicroVET platform. Ambassadors were encouraged to identify and invite external providers to share their microcredential courses in the platform starting in the summer of 2023. It has also been agreed that external providers need to join the Alliance first by signing the Memorandum of Understanding – as any member -, as well as accepting the Code of Conduct regulating the legal, ethical and educational framework for courses in the platform. Thus, launching the Alliance and the development of external courses are linked.

This implies a soft launch of the Alliance starting in June 2023. During the summer, the first level of membership building will start.

In parallel, the MicroVET partners are also approaching the EU Digital Education Hub to establish collaboration with them.

The official, more formal launch of the EU Alliance for Microcredentials will take place during the EU Vocational Skills Week 2023 (23-27 October 2023). However, after the soft launch, the Ambassadors and MicroVET partners are taking advantage of any other possibilities linked to the European Year of Skills that makes it possible to promote the Alliance, attract and recruit new members.

Options for sustained operations

The EU Alliance for Microcredentials will be launched as an informal network of interested parties, based on each new member signing the Memorandum of Understanding. During the period of the MicroVET project, ending on 30 April 2024, as well as in the following maximum 6 months, the other signatory will be the European School Heads Association, authorised by MicroVET partner organisations to act on their behalf in matters relating to the project. In parallel, the Novel Group is sustaining – offering the contents, making strictly necessary technical updates and making uploading of courses possible without active IT support - the MicroVET platform for an agreed period of 5 years starting on 1 May 2024. Maintenance after this period is also subject to the sustainability arrangements.

After the aforementioned period, the Alliance will need to make a decision on its sustained operations. For that reason, the MicroVET partnership will provide an opportunity for Alliance members to meet in person during the final conference of the MicroVET project in order to set forth a future structure owned by members that will carry forward and sustain the Alliance. To support this decision, the following scenarios have been outlined at the launch of the Alliance:

1. **Network with lead facilitator.** The Alliance continues as a network of diverse stakeholders having a vested interest in the offer, uptake and recognition of microcredentials. A member – not necessarily one of the original MicroVET partners - volunteers and is trusted to take care of network finances including raising operating funds from network member companies and applying for funding as a chief or sole applicant for European Union or any other funding available. Membership in the Alliance is to be open to all national and European organizations having a stake in microcredentials, as well as individuals (training developers, researchers, role models). Members elect a decision-making body that accepts new members, decides on work programme and application for funding. Facilitation of their work happens through a secretariat provided by a willing partner. The facilitator is not making decisions. This needs a high level of trust in the organization taking the lead. One option is to rotate the secretariat of the network among a number of willing, able and trusted members. While it provides for the continued openness and flexibility of the network, and allows for a focus on widening the training offer through the website which brings a specific added value to some members, it raises the question of which organization takes this role, provides the necessary resources and would be accepted

by Alliance members. This needs to be discussed with and agreed on with the involvement of the whole Alliance.

2. **Voluntary consortium.** The Alliance becomes a consortium facilitated by a committee of volunteers or elected by members, or holds a rotating Secretariat that receives funding in-kind from its members (namely funding for meetings) in order to convene periodically. The main activities would be restricted to organising an annual meeting and advocacy for microcredentials through members. The consortium would still maintain the website offering courses, but will not actively widen the training offer. This arrangement is light on bureaucracy but limited in that funding cannot be applied for directly and it may be difficult to sustain long-term. It may also offer very limited scope for further advocacy work on behalf of the Alliance due to the lack of funding.
3. **Legal entity.** The Alliance could become a legal entity, with the participation of all or most members, with the option to accept new members. This would need a commitment from those deciding to establish it in the form of some initial funding and participation in the supervision of the new legal entity. Once legal status is achieved, the Alliance can apply for public and/or private funding and continue the work started during initial period. Given the transnational nature and European scope of the Alliance the following legal forms could be considered: an international association registered in Belgium (aisbl), a Dutch foundation with associated members or a Dutch association. In other EU-countries transnational organisations are more difficult to establish as most countries require legal representative to be residents or citizens of the country of establishment. A Swiss association or foundation is also feasible, but in that case the EU-funding opportunities are more limited.

Annex I – Memorandum of Understanding

Parties

The European School Heads Association (ESHA) is a European non-profit organisation with its registered address at Herenstraat 35, 3512 KB Utrecht, the Netherlands, signing on behalf of the members of the MicroVET consortium, the founders of the European Alliance for Microcredentials.

[Member] is a ... organisation registered at

Background

The European Alliance for Microcredentials (Alliance), represented here by ESHA, is established with the mission of promoting the offer, uptake, and recognition of microcredentials across the European Union and beyond, in the public, for profit and non-profit sectors, with special focus on formal education and the labour market.

[Member].....

To further capitalise on the strengths and synergies of both institutions, parties have been engaged in discussions concluding in the decision that [Member] becomes a member of the Alliance.

The parties are entering into this Memorandum of Understanding (Memorandum) with the objective of advancing separate and joint goals in recognition of their mutual interest in the field of microcredentials.

Objectives

Parties, through this Memorandum, commit to:

Promoting each other's activities.

[Member] undertakes to promote the activities of the Alliance with special focus on its advocacy work and free training offer included in the MicroVET website. The Alliance undertakes to promote any free microcredentials courses [Member] offers as well as its

work in the field of promoting the offer, uptake, and recognition of microcredentials. Part of this collaboration is aiming to support **policy development**.

Professional cooperation. Parties will look for opportunities for activity-based collaboration on microcredentials-related programmes or projects in which the Alliance, its current and/or future members and [Member] are presently engaged or wish to engage. This cooperation may also include research activities for evidence-based policy making in the field of microcredentials.

Term of Memorandum of Understanding

This Memorandum will be in effect for an unlimited period of time.

Once each year, the representatives of Parties will review the way in which this Memorandum has functioned and agree – together with other members of the Alliance - to a program of activity and development which, in the spirit of collaboration and cooperation, fosters closer ties and encourages further development.

The Memorandum can be ended at any time with the mutual consent of each party or by the withdrawal of a party with notice of thirty (30) days.

Publicity

Publicity and information about the relationship between the two organisations requires mutual consent.

By signing this Memorandum, [Member] agrees to be publicly listed as a member of the Alliance.

Intellectual Property

Intellectual property remains the property of those who developed it and the relationship between the Alliance and [Member] does not in itself constitute a legal entity.

Costs

Each party is responsible for its own costs and expenses associated with all matters relating to and all transactions arising from this Memorandum.

Executed as a memorandum of understanding.

Signed for and on behalf of EHSA by its duly authorised representative:

G.P.M. van Haren
Director
... 2023

Signed for and on behalf of [Member] by its duly authorised representative:

Name
Title
...2023

Annex II – Code of Conduct

Parties

The European School Heads Association (ESHA) is a European non-profit organisation with its registered address at Herenstraat 35, 3512 KB Utrecht, the Netherlands, signing on behalf of the members of the MicroVET consortium, the founders of the European Alliance for Microcredentials.

[Member] is a ... organisation registered at

Background

The European Alliance for Microcredentials (Alliance), represented here by ESHA, is established with the mission of promoting the offer, uptake, and recognition of microcredentials across the European Union and beyond, in the public, for profit and non-profit sectors, with special focus on formal education and the labour market. As part of this mission, it operates a digital platform for free courses leading to microcredentials, the MicroVET platform.

[Member]..... and offers courses leading to microcredentials in the following areas:

Parties have agreed to enrich the MicroVET training offer together by [Member] offering courses via the MicroVET platform by sharing some of its training offer via the platform and by the Alliance agreeing to provide the technical background and assistance to do so.

Providing and updating courses

The Alliance is providing the [Member] with a document template that provides format for sharing the courses' content for uploading on the platform. The Alliance undertakes the uploading of the courses on the platform by its MicroVET Ambassadors. The Alliance also offers technical assistance provided by Novel Group SARL, a partner in the MicroVET project. The technical assistance is ensured until 30 April 2024. In the period after that, it is dependent on future funding arrangements.

[Member] provides its selection of courses free of charge via the MicroVET platform, however, charging users for certification is allowed. This, however, needs to be clearly communicated before a user takes the course. The certificates for courses offered via the MicroVET platform are jointly issued on behalf of [Member] and MicroVET. All courses provided by [Member] will be shared on the platform with the member's logo.

Intellectual property regulations

[Member] takes full responsibility for the intellectual property rights in relation to the contents of the courses they provide. By sending a course with its full contents for uploading is also a statement about them holding all relevant rights. Creative Commons or similar licences are preferable. The Alliance's hosting the courses does not create any intellectual property rights. The Alliance regularly reports to the [Member] about the number of users so that [Member] can fulfil any intellectual property related payment obligations.

In case intellectual property breach is reported to the Alliance, the Alliance has the right to temporarily pull the impacted course(s) from the MicroVET platform. Such reports are to be communicated to [Member] immediately so that they can take the necessary steps to either prove that they hold all necessary intellectual property rights or to come to an agreement with the rights holders. Once the issues is clarified, the course(s) will be included in the training offer again.

Data protection regulations

The regulations of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) are applicable to the subject of this code of conduct, especially in relation to the data handled for registration and certification purposes. The data minimisation principle is to be rigorously implemented, thus only the absolutely necessary data for training and/or certification purposes will be handled for training participants.

All participants are to be informed about their data handled and their consent is obtained when registering for a course. In case of training participants that are minors, a joint consent of the minor and their legal guardian is to be obtained.

The data handler will be Novel Group SARL (12 Rue de BastogneL-1217 Luxembourg, trade registry No. B221280), the operator of the MicroVET platform.

Novel and ESHA are obliged to inform [Member] immediately if there is a change in the operator or the representative of the Alliance.

Term of the agreement

This agreement is established for an unlimited period and can be ended by either party with a 30 day notice period. Ending the agreement also entails the immediate termination of the training offer by [Member] on the MicroVET platform. In case of termination, both parties will keep data of certified participants on their files.

Applicable law

In case of legal disputes, the law of the Netherlands prevails.

Signed for and on behalf of EHSA by its duly authorised representative:

G.P.M. van Haren

Director

... 2023

Signed for and on behalf of [Member] by its duly authorised representative:

Name

Title

...2023



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