

microVET

Introducing micro-credentials to the digital era of VET

Current status report on micro-credentials

Prepared by CESIE



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Introduction

This report on the current status on micro-credentials of partner countries, was prepared in order to have a proper understanding on the current situation about this topic especially for VET institutions and VET trainers and to outline the situation at European and national level, focusing on the progress towards familiarisation with and up-taking of the micro-credential approach, emerging needs of training organisations, learners, and the business sector, as well as recommendations on the establishment of synergies and the organisation of common initiatives to better adjust to future requirements. The report will present the results of the transnational focus groups, that are expected to offer targeted answers to specific queries that emerged throughout the initial project research and needs analysis. The current status report will not only provide the fundamentals for the upcoming development of the methodology, but it will also act as a starting point for the up-taking of micro-credentials.

Methodology

The transnational focus groups were carried out by all partners between March and April 2022 and due to covid restrictions only one partner (Know and Can) implemented it face-to-face. All other partners performed online meetings using different platforms (Zoom, Teams) or by other means such as telephone interviews. In total, the project's partnership managed to involve 68 participants to the activity, a very good result. Participant's occupation ranged from being business actors, teachers, VET Centres representatives, trainees in the VET field and other VET-related lines of work.

Each partner organization carried out the focus groups following the guidelines prepared specifically for this task by the Bulgarian partner (Know and Can) which included methodologies, suggestions and the questions that have been implemented (Annex I). After, each partner compiled a national report following a precise structure in order to standardize results prepared by the Italian partner (CESIE) (Annex II).

Each partner approached the task in different ways, mostly to respond to the difficulties of finding the proper target group and manage to involve it in the focus group activity at the same time. Partners adapted quickly and effectively to respond to participants' needs in the best possible way, to ensure not only a positive and useful results, but also to don't compromise the activity as it was expected by the project application and respect the project timeline.

Conclusively it is possible to say, that even with some difficulties, partners managed to carry out the activity successfully, involving the correct target groups and a large number of participants, larger than expected increasing the quality and reliability of the information gathered.



General background

The Micro-credentials is a theme that is in permanent discussion among the European Union, European Commission, and the participant countries. These types of credentials won a higher spotlight with the COVID-19 pandemic, and they become an important source of training during the lockdowns. Short pieces of training that can upskill or reskill workers, and that have credit among employers have all the components to be a valuable resource to have. Many workers and students took some of those pieces of training during the lockdowns. Each partner's country came from a different background in relation to micro-credential and the current state of knowledge about the topic. For this reason, this report will present the general background based on countries in order to highlight differences and similarities without compromise the overall result.

Netherlands

The Dutch Ministry for Education promotes micro-credentials as part of its life-long learning policy. For under 18 students, that are still under compulsory education, it is possible to obtain several types of qualifications in a VET college:

- A full diploma, registered and acknowledged throughout The Netherlands that qualify for starting a career;
- A certificate, partial diploma (micro credential) for parts of the vocational training, registered and acknowledged throughout The Netherlands that qualify for starting a career, often combined with further learning;
- School VET Testimony, focus on acquiring practical skills, added with as much theoretical knowledge as possible, as part of a 'MBO verklaring' (School VET testimony), not registered or acknowledged throughout The Netherlands that qualify for starting to work, combined with study for a certificate of diploma. This can be done by means of the 'derde leerweg' (Third Learning route). This is a more flexible VET that can be done in a shorter period of time.

Students over 18 often learn in a hybrid form, a combination of working and learning. There is a standing practice of hybrid schooling and learning in The Netherlands. Schools and companies work together in an organisation, SBB, in which VET colleges and the industry cooperate. SBB supervises the quality of the training, the qualifications, apprenticeship, traineeship and training jobs.

Greece

The micro-credentials in Greece are not implemented under a specific policy or framework. They are primarily aligned with the university courses delivered by their lifelong learning centers providing ECVET credits to students based on the number of hours needed to complete the course. Even if Greek universities are already working on developing micro-credentials and they create more and more short learning programs, a common definition and approach to their validation and recognition are lacking. Also, private education providers (e.g., VET providers) have created short courses and seek to develop synergies with national and international accreditation organizations. Furthermore, businesses (mainly working on education & career guidance) and lifelong learning centers constantly create new short learning programs. Still, they are not aligned with credits. Greece's educational organizations and partners have realized the essence of creating short learning programmes, but they are not aware of micro-credentials.



Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, micro-credits outside the formal education system can be obtained from Vocational Training Centres. These centres receive their accreditation from a centralized state body - the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training - on the basis of a presented training programme - containing theoretical and practical parts, equipment, qualified teachers. The training programmes are quite diverse in terms of topics and duration, but they follow the current market demand and not so much the research perspectives on the future of the labour market. Unfortunately, mainstream training programmes are on hard skills and only a few pays attention to soft skills and unfortunately these are not present in formal training. Full list of the VTC in Bulgaria with information about their spheres of interest, courses and activities can be found here: <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/registar-na-tsentrivotve-za-profesiona/>. Practically every formal vocational educational institution has a vocational training center, but unfortunately in many places the equipment is old - obsolete. Naturally there are exceptions, vocational schools in large cities related to the automotive industry, generously sponsored by large car manufacturers and active dual training, centers training personnel for the tourism industry due to the specifics of the Bulgarian tourism market.

Portugal

In Portugal, these micro-credentials are rising alongside with the rising interest for them inside the EU. There are already some services that are providing them, such as NAU. “Services like NAU have the ideal characteristics to materialize the concept” (FCCN, 2021) of micro-credentials. This platform is supported by a variety of different stakeholders, among them, we can find the Portuguese Government, a myriad of public and private projects, and even European funds. The platform has found success during the pandemic situation, and it is in permanent growth. It has pieces of training from a very wide range of topics, and it is easy to develop and incorporate new training into the platform

Services like NAU are growing in the Portuguese scope and many Universities are now starting to implement these micro-credential services among their courses. At the moment the University of Aveiro is pilot testing a program concerning the implementation of micro-credentials and micro-modules in order to improve the quality of the student curriculum (Universidade de Aveiro, 2021).

Italy

In Italy, micro-credentials are not yet implemented under any specific framework or policy, however they are mentioned often as a strengthening tool to boost education for young people and people willing to learn new things (Scuola Normale Superiore, Aprile 2021). For the MIUR (Italian Ministry of Education), micro-credential could be implemented with tools such as “open-badges” and so these are considered new approaches which could be useful with new technology in order to improve the educational offer for young people. Most of the work done in the field of micro-credentials is done by schools, universities as well as local organizations with specific projects and activities. Therefore, there is still much that can be done and implemented regarding this topic, which is definitively gaining attention amongst teachers as well, whom don’t really know what they are or how they can work with them.



Luxembourg

Although it is one of the tiniest countries in the world, Luxembourg offers a splendidly cosmopolitan environment and a home to plenty of top-ranked universities. Luxembourg is also one of the safest nations in the world; and, due to its multiculturalism, any foreign student can easily adapt to the vibrant and lively atmosphere of Luxembourg. Within Luxembourg universities, Bachelor's, Master's degrees and PhD courses are generally bilingual French/English or French/German. Some degree courses are trilingual and some are taught entirely in English. Students need a high level of proficiency in the language needed for the degree programme. International students can apply for several foundation programmes available in many subject areas.

In addition, universities offer "European Masters", Master programmes with a focus on Europe, Erasmus programmes and Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, vocational training, part-time and full-time MBA's with internships and professional certificate programmes. An online event marked the official launch of the European Digital Credentials for Learning (EDCL) system across the European Union (EU); the launch took place in the presence of Nicolas Schmit, a Luxembourgish politician serving as European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights.

In 2021, Luxembourg was the first European country to issue more than 1,600 such certificates to all students in vocational training. A total of 529 technician's diploma (diplôme de technicien - DT) certificates, 951 vocational aptitude diploma (diplôme d'aptitude professionnelle - DAP) certificates and 134 vocational capacity certificates (certificat de capacité professionnelle - CCP) were transmitted digitally in addition to the traditional paper format. Among the pilot countries which have passed their test phase, Luxembourg recorded the highest number of EDCLs awarded to graduates of vocational education and training.



Main themes/questions

Due to the complexity and differences of results gathered by all partners, this report will present the results and information collected by each partner, once again, per country. This will facilitate the production of the report and also provide more comprehensive and easier to understand presentation of the partnership's work. For the sake of length, this report will not present each participant's description and their work, instead a list of participants will be included as annex in the document for the partners who collected names and information about the people involved in the focus groups (Annex III). The results will be presented topic by topic including all the information that each partners decided to include in their national reports.

1. Knowledge and Experience

Netherlands

All interviewees are well acquainted with micro credentials. Some of them had a lot of experience with micro credentials. It encourages cooperation between schools and the industry in public-private cooperation, focusing on a hybrid form of development of the students to, what they call, the flexible professional. Some of the participants initiated projects that focused on training professionals to switch to the technical professions by means of micro credentials, together with their partners in the industry and VET colleges.

Greece

The VET provider involved has extensive micro-credentials knowledge. The completion of a micro-credentials program has exceptionally increased humans' career prospects. Many countries have aligned them with academic credits/ECTS. People having completed only compulsory education have entered the labor market because of the successful completion of the program. Also, even if a person is working in another field, micro-credentials have helped them change careers. The VET trainees involved are not acquainted with the micro-credentials. Last but not least, the business actors involved are not familiar with micro-credentials even if they are designing or planning courses as part of their businesses. Their courses are not aligned with credits.

Bulgaria

Almost every vocational secondary school has a vocational training center. Often it is duplicated by an informal one, which allows for an expansion of the courses offered or even their combination. Such is the case with the Vocational Training Centre for Food Industry in Sofia, where along with courses on hard skills there are also those on soft skills - effective communication, conflict resolution, successful teamwork. It is very important to note that when it comes to professional knowledge and skills in Bulgaria the first place is not the documents but their demonstration on the spot. Naturally, the institution issuing them is of great importance, there are those with established and maintained reputations (which is not always a guarantee). Particularly controversial was the issue related to the duration of the courses, their intensity and the effectiveness of online learning. The general opinion is that there are very few areas where online learning has more advantages than face-to-face learning. The duration of courses is also not always tailored to the individual capabilities of each participant, resulting in large gaps that hinder both laggards and advanced learners. Encouragement by employers



for retraining and promotion is already a recognized need and they are ready to invest in this direction, if there is a response from the training side.

Portugal

The concept of micro-credentials was presented to the participants in order for all of them to have the same understanding of the topic at hand. Then the participants were questioned if they already have participated in or developed any micro-credential training. There were some participants that said that they already have developed short pieces of training. Those participants were the teachers/trainers, and business representatives, although they also said that the development was very sporadic and that they do not have a lot of experience in doing so. Regarding the participation in such a type of training, all the participants said that they already have participated in at least one.

In terms of the COVID-19 effect on the existence of micro-credentials, all participants stated that they believe that they have become increasingly more relevant during the pandemic situation.

Italy

When asked about micro-credentials, specifically if they knew about the topic and if they ever implemented during their educational and training activities, most of the participants didn't know the meaning of micro-credentials and had no previous experience with the topic, therefore, examples were made and asked the participants if they ever carried out short learning programmes and training activities as well as to provide examples and if not, why. The participants stated that during their experience, most of the training and educational programmes are expected to last the entirety of the year, exactly like the traditional school programmes. Therefore, they had little to no experience in specific short courses aimed at accrediting micro-credentials or micro-skills to students. The only experience in the field was related to specific courses regarding IT skills and English certifications, but even these courses lasted several months and had formal exams and certifications in the framework of the Italian Ministry of Education. Regarding the effect brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was unanimous consent among participants that the situation of learning programmes deteriorated due to the online experience. Teachers stated that regarding usual year-long development and training, the online implementation of activities is very difficult, however short learning programmes could work with senior and very motivated participants.

Luxembourg

The majority of the participants have involved in micro-credentials either as trainees or as providers. The VET provider has in-depth knowledge of micro-credentials while the business actors provide short-term learning programmes in their companies. Some trainees knew about the micro-credential approach but never had the opportunity to participate in a related one, but others learned about their existence for first time during the focus group.

After a question made by trainees on the definition of micro-credentials, the VET providers seized the opportunity to give some details about how his organization design and carry out the short-term learning programmes. The representative of Consultancy Agency has also involved with micro-credentials by carrying out short learning programmes that her company organizes. The HR company neither design nor implements short learning programmes but outsources them.



All participants believe that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the process of establishing the micro-credential approach and made them more accessible and attractive. Both the increased need of the labor market for new ways of remote working and the extra free time because of the COVID-19 restrictions contributed to this phenomenon.



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2. Provision and services

Netherlands

In The Netherlands the concept of micro-credentials is unbreakably connected with hybrid learning. All interviewees agree on this item. This means that VET colleges, company schools and the industry at large, cooperate in the development of the student and the professional.

Furthermore, participants agree that this type of learning should be practice-driven. The experience of the professional should be the motivator for the student to learn, explore and develop. Companies and the industry should have a more prominent role in initiating these programs. Another opinion stated that students, especially under 18, need a broad and comprehensive development, not just focused on the vocational skills that the industry requires. This is what VET colleges are for. For the over 18 students in micro-credentials programs, this is a completely different story. They are adults, mostly employed in the industry, and seek specific training schedules to develop their skills and improve their employability. For them, hybrid learning focused on the needs of the industry, is less of a problem. But this excludes VET colleges. This focus on practice driven learning, also means that online learning is not a replacement for practice driven learning. It's a possible addition.

Greece

In Greece, micro-credentials are mostly aligned with the short programs of universities' lifelong learning centers, which provide credits to the learners. The VET provider has cooperation with international and national accreditation partners to ensure that they give certificates providing learners with credits. Other countries implementing micro-credentials: The United Kingdom is currently designing/developing micro-credential courses collaborating with foundations/organizations and the UK's Open University. The university offers the courses in conjunction with the FUTURE LEARN platform. The learners receive the number of credits corresponding to the study hours, workload, and course duration.

The resources needed for the recognition and delivery of short programs. VET providers think that funding, staff, and digital development are fully aligned since funding is needed to ensure that the digital environment of the course is appropriately designed and developed. VET trainees considered that funding might be the most essential. Concerning the online course specialists, they prioritized them in the following way:

- a) Fundings;
- b) digital development;
- c) staff.

They believe that it depends on the magnitude of the course designed. Career counselor interviewed thinks that funding is more applicable to his business since he needs to rent a studio. His business has career experts, but not experts knowing how to record/edit videos. Development of strategies for the adoption of micro-credentials. There is a need to develop a better transnational partnerships network from Greece or other countries focused on micro-credentials and align the organizations providing funding and the target groups with the micro-credentials.

Bulgaria



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There is a surplus of vocational training centers in Bulgaria - they have both stories, when at the peak of unemployment in 2015-2017 the state generously funded various courses so that the unemployed could acquire the necessary skills. As a result of many factors, the situation has changed - improved domestic economic situation and foreign investment in the economy, international labor migration (even in the context of Brexit). In order to stay on the market, many such educational institutions began to cooperate, to offer combinations of courses, which, unfortunately, are not always supported. The example in the food industry has already been mentioned, there is a similar one in the transport education center, where there is a course for tinsmiths and as one of the trainees joked, "I know the streams (electric part) and I can straighten the sheets(fenders), I don't need service".

The state, in its role of accreditor, is increasingly raising the requirements for training centers - especially in the area of technical equipment, and this is a serious problem for many training centers. Green transition in society requires serious investment, new knowledge and skills, even for teachers themselves. Here the explanatory activity to the business is very important - for the construction and furnishing of a "smart home" a set of new skills is needed. Digital adult education in Bulgaria is significantly lagging behind, many people drop out of the labor market due to lack of such and inability to find suitable educational institutions and forms. Digitalization as a global phenomenon will become more and more dynamic, which must be reflected in the educational programs and resources of educational institutions and become a mandatory element in each of them in one form or another. Where is the effect of an online course if there is limited access due to lack of skills.

The interaction between employers and training institutions is extremely important. Flexibility in temporary or permanent provision of equipment, assistance in specialized international training, providing dual form are just some of the recommendations, the good thing is that employers are aware of this and many are ready for such investments. For their part, training organizations need to reconsider and force them to change their strategic views and plans - to "upgrade the knowledge and skills" of their teachers, to update their training program to meet the needs of learners - such as weathering, accessibility, as intensity. In the absence of external funding to provide re-equipment.

Portugal

The totality of the participants referred that there is no policy in their institutions that recognize micro-credentials. They have told that they participate in many training pieces that are important to their organizations. Nevertheless, there is nothing giving a credential to those training, so they do not have a real impact outside the organization. The participants said that many times they do some micro-credential piece of training in NAU, Google, or LinkedIn in order to have them in their CVs.

Funding and human resources were the most referred topics when the participants were asked about the type of resources needed to improve the organization's view on short and flexible training programs. Human resources in order to have them developing the best materials and the best modules possible, and the funding to pay for all of those needs.

Italy

Although the training organization involved in the focus group was very open and full of initiatives, they do not provide policy or frameworks to recognize learning programmes related to micro-credentials, mostly because there is no such thing in the educational framework of the Italian Ministry



of Education. The participants did not know of other institutions providing such services. However, the VET center involved during the focus groups would be eager to have the possibility to introduce short learning programmes however difficult it may be. To do so, the resources needed are large and difficult to find, in fact, it is hard to find and fund staff as well as participants motivated enough for extra programmes. Especially Euroform stated they don't lack equipment (each student has at their disposal a tablet), however students come from difficult backgrounds or with specific mindsets. For example, being a VET school, most of the students are willing to reach their objectives in being proficient in that specific profession, however this comes at the cost of other subjects considered "less useful" by the students themselves. This is very hard to address as the educational programmes (however flexible they might be) are set from the beginning of the year and carried out. Participants believe that VET institutions have more difficulties in implementing short and flexible training programs.

Luxembourg

The VET providers think that the micro-credentials certification procedure is still blurred as it is a new approach and now there is the opportunity to create a common policy or a common framework for the recognition and acceptance of micro-credentials. For the Consultancy Agency there is a policy for accepting micro-credentials earned outside of their institution based on the quality assessment of the certification. The quality of the certification is evaluated based on the reputation of the institution providing the micro-credentials, the duration of the programme and the learning outcomes. HR Company, on the other hand, accepts micro-credentials from any certified organization.

Regarding the resources that are needed in order to better recognize and deliver flexible short learning programmes, the majority of the participants think that the most important resource for them is funding. As the VET provider said, "If you have the necessary funds either state or industrial, you can design and deliver the trainings". In addition, staff training is of major importance while the level of digital development is satisfactory for both business agents and the VET provider.

In terms of financial sustainability, both the VET provider and the consultant agreed that funding is the most important parameter. In addition, according to the VET provider, alliances with the industry are essential for the effectiveness of micro-credential programmes. In this aspect of sustainability, the consultant added that the most appropriate training plan should be selected for each trainee according to his / her particular needs, as well as more practical training than theoretical knowledge would add value to the micro-credentials. The HR company is going to decide how to include micro-credentials in its career plan, and so it has to research the best approach to take. Finally, the trainees agreed that it is very important for them to have a plan to follow regarding the micro-credentials they will attend.



3. Preference, design and development

Greece

Content and learning methods. All participants agreed that different content styles should be combined when attending an online training, as there are different needs depending on the topic and the field. Trainees spoke about the importance of an online repository that should be easily accessible. Even though the trainees found the idea of quizzes quite beneficial, the experts gave a different opinion by pointing out that quizzes do not provide the actual picture of the learning outcome. In an attempt to explain that there are fields where trainees should take up lab courses or where simulations of real business environments could be used, the Provider managed to influence the trainees into thinking about the importance of simulations. There should also be easily accessible modules that trainees can download and high-quality videos with transcripts in each individual's study language or in English. The participants, all thinking as trainees, recognize the significance of workbooks accompanied with the videos. Live content is also important as students and teachers can interact.

Key features for active participation. Specialists on the topic have stated that a student-centered learning environment has proven to be the most important aspect of a learning program. First of all, interactive activities should lead to interactive assessment. In the platform where the course is held, students could add their comments or have a place where they communicate with each other and with the teacher to exchange views, create study groups, and get out of their comfort zones. Nonsynchronous education can be combined with some live Q&A sessions so that both the students and the teacher can get instant feedback. Self-assessment can happen by filling the same quiz or survey in different course stages. Questions can be incorporated into the video either in script or with video/audio. Another point made by the most experienced Business Actor is that earners should also get involved with offline exercises such as research, communication with other people, or physical activities. He also pointed out that what has proven to be very effective is the Kahoot game, especially if there is a prize for the winner. A trainee also highlighted that digital tool such as blackboards could also be used.

Accessibility. When it comes to preferences regarding devices, all participants consider laptops and desktop computers more user-friendly and easily accessible than any other tool. It is essential to have a chat while taking the class or be able to write down notes. However, the majority of the participants who have experience in online courses pointed out that depending on the class, there could be modules that are effectively taught even on a smartphone. Smartphones may be preferable if someone wants to take a class while doing something else and have it in the background.

Bulgaria

At the risk of damaging the main idea of the project, the common opinion of all groups of participants in the focus groups is that for the purposes of vocational training microcredits through fully online training are an elusive goal. Some of the reasons have already been mentioned - vocational training for the most part requires practical work - with equipment, machinery, materials. No matter how good a video or audio lesson is, it could only be ancillary, upgrading the theory in an attractive way.



Many examples have been given of popular TV or online shows related to cooking, car repair or design solutions, which are just good promotional videos that have almost nothing to do with reality, especially when it comes to amateurs or beginners. The teachers shared personal experience from the preparation of video lessons during the Covid crisis and almost two years of distance learning. Definitely the theoretical part can be prepared in a more interesting, attractive and engaging way for the learners through interactive exercises, quick mini-tests and even interdisciplinary ones (where there are combined courses). It is also possible to study specific digital elements of training online - specific programs, CNC, test and diagnostic equipment, but without its practical application is only half. Assessment modules can also be digitized and implemented online in case they do not require physical construction, repair, replacement, etc. activities. As already mentioned, there is a significant difference in ICT skills across age groups, which is an obstacle but also a challenge to improve. Certainly, educational institutions need to diversify their teaching tools and the project will certainly help them in this, will motivate them to create their own in accordance with the specifics taught and the target groups with which it works. Digitization of classrooms is also a necessary investment with a long-term future.

Portugal

At this moment of the focus group, the trainees had the most impactful feedback. They referred to their experience in the two previous years of having online classes and they were ready to tell us what for them worked and what was not that optimized. The trainees talked about having the training in multiple formats matching the four different learning styles (visual, auditory, reading and writing, and kinesthetic). At this point, the VET trainer in the more technological area told us that could be a good idea to have a questionnaire first to understand the type of learning style that the future trainee has and then automatically redirect them to the correct learning style training.

The rest of the participants told us that a hybrid style would be the best approach, nevertheless, the focus should be on doing the training practical, and to do so it must be gamified whenever possible.

When asked about the preferred way to access the online training all of them told us that a laptop is the best option.

Italy

When asked about learning methodologies and new technologies at the service of training and education, participants stated that there are definitely positive effects on their student's motivation when using interactive tools such as videos, quizzes, etc. Therefore, they suggest that in order to be successful, online trainings need to be interactive and full of interesting activities which can make participants really involved and motivated. Participants stated that most of them worked with students carrying difficult social and economic backgrounds, therefore, they stated that a student-centred learning environment should be the key in order to properly involved students. However, with such students, an in-person connection with the teacher is really important, so there needs to be some sort of connection with this type of target groups. Teachers prefer that online training should be available across all devices since, especially in Sicily, many people face difficulties in owning desktop

computers or proper tablets useful for training purposes.

Luxembourg



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At this point the trainees took the floor and said that video and recording classes are her preferred learning methods. The VET provider agreed that the use of video in the learning process is very attractive especially for young people. However, its foundation uses a combination of learning methods, such as text, quizzes, videos, recorded classes, etc. On the other hand, the consultant believes that the short-term nature of micro-credentials makes texts and quizzes more appropriate in terms of learning content.

The representative of the HR company highlighted that the interaction is of major importance for the better engagement of the trainees. The VET provider then took the opportunity to share with the group an online training method used by his institution to achieve interaction between the trainees. What they do is to divide the trainees into different zoom rooms where they work as a team and then present their results to the whole team. This method helps learners become more actively involved and feel more responsible in the microcredit program.

In terms of user-friendliness and accessibility, both business actors and the VET provider believe that smartphones and tablets are their preferred devices, as you can have them with you anytime, anywhere. However, the trainees agreed that the devices they use for the learning process is not an important issue, but the content of these trainings is where we need to focus.



4. Barriers and needs

Netherlands

Access to short learning programs. VET colleges in the technical sector have become scarce. The number of students in technology sector has dropped over the years and this made a lot of technical programs unsustainable for a lot of VET colleges. This means e.g. that a 15-year old VET student needs to travel 90 km from Den Helder to Amsterdam to attend school. This is a major problem especially when the focus is strict on practice driven learning. Online learning can only provide part of the education needed in the field of technology, because what is needed is an inquisitive, curious attitude towards their profession. A drive to solve problems they encounter in practice, that they have not been trained for. This is a type of flexibility that is necessary for the future. Online programs have not solved this problem yet, and I did not meet any enthusiasm with any of my interviewees on this item.

Difficulties and challenges. Although organisations like SBB, CIV and ‘Platform for Technologie’ were invented as much as 10 years ago to promote and organize the cooperation between VET colleges and the industry in developing credentials and micro credentials, a few significant problems still remain unsolved:

- A lot of companies have developed their own training schemes and programs for their employees on specific items that they find necessary. They are not able to provide a credential/diploma/qualification that is acknowledged.
- VET colleges are the ones that can provide credentials (full diploma’s, certificates or testimonies), so they are necessary as a partner for the industry. According to CIV and TN,
- they work within the system of the OCW which is quite restrictive and does not allow for much innovation and experimentation especially where curriculum and timetables are concerned. This hinders the innovation that the industry needs. On the other hand, VET colleges are required by law to comply with the regulations of OCW. MBO Raad clearly states that there is not much room for maneuvering there.
- CIV think it would be possible to provide a broad/comprehensive development in a purely hybrid form so that the requirements of the VET can be met. This is not agreed upon by MBO Raad though. They find the industry is too focused on business opportunities to be able to guarantee the comprehensive development of the students under 18.
- For over 18 student/professionals, CIV think it would be possible to develop a pure hybrid learning program in a technical field, with basic training for 70% of the time and specialized training for 30% of the time. But companies in the industry will have to work together in order to make it financially feasible for VET colleges to provide courses. And that is a problem because companies think of each other as competitors, not as partners. CIV and TN think that this is will be a future reality and companies will have to adopt in order to find, train and employ new professionals.
- All interviewees agree that VET colleges should be more prepared to allow the industry as a partner in the learning process of the students, so that practice driven learning is promoted.
- The colleges are vulnerable to financial risks and therefor reluctant to participate in experiments and innovations. CIV thinks that companies in future will be prepared to provide



some financial stability in the cooperation, if their interests are met. This is not a reality at the moment.

- The reality is that VET college students who are not under compulsory education, are offered jobs before they graduate, and continue their education in a hybrid form (micro credentials), paid for by the company.

Learning Needs. CIV finds that for professionals over 18 it would be an encouraging prospect if they could obtain a full diploma by obtaining micro credentials through the years. But they experience some obstacles. The most important is that there is a time frame of 5 years in which they must obtain all micro-credentials in order to graduate. Most of them don't think this doable in combination with work and their private life.

Greece

Challenges. Participants who are already integrated into the business market find that the most challenging aspect of our everyday lives is time management and how our external environment affects us. These courses need to maintain their flexibility. The students should have an attendance sheet to which they can save their progress. The participants pointed out that most people find short-term courses not as reliable as Higher Education courses in accessing the job market. To increase access to these programs, people should learn how and why to trust them. Another challenging aspect is dealing with technical difficulties. For example, in Greece, slow internet speed can cause trouble in connection. The program used should be light and user-friendly so that everyone can access it easily or be able to download it. Many people find it more convenient to forward, skip or watch the course at x1,25 speed. In addition to that, subtitles in all videos could also be very helpful.

Effective access for people with a wide range of learning needs. In terms of the most important aspect of ensuring the effectiveness of a program for people with a wide range of learning needs, everyone claimed that what has to be taken into consideration each time is what the target group of the class is. Those who have created short learning programs expressed that the most important thing is to investigate the learning environment and its needs with research, surveys, or even polls to find and create suitable tools. All students should go through a screening process so that the trainers can be certain of their needs, weaknesses, and strengths and assign them to their corresponding level in terms of language, educational background, and learning abilities. Depending on each person's needs, the training can be done in the form of videos/audio/e-books. Minorities should also be integrated both in the classroom and in teaching methodology.

Micro-credential success in VET. Short courses, especially online ones, have a positive impact on time management as people can fit classes into their schedules. They give everyone a chance to get more familiar with certain topics and gain as much information about them as possible in a short time. The Vet Provider and the Business Actors expressed their optimism by saying that they also impact the market as they form eligible candidates who are also allowed to follow a new career path or develop and specialize in an existing one. If a person finishes the course successfully, they have to define its alignment with the labor market and society. For a successful course, the teachers and lecturers should be very familiar with the topic and the market industry so as to attract people and provide the necessary equipment.

Impact on organizations. Learners acquiring micro-credentials are not the only ones given a competitive advantage for the job market. Those programs also have an impact on organizations. An



important insight from the Provider's perspective is that Institutions can create networks and collaborations. Moreover, specialization in the field raises their visibility and makes them thought leaders in the market. By gaining a reputation, they have less expenses and attract more students.

Bulgaria

In order to best represent the results gathered by the Bulgaria's partner, regarding barriers and needs, the specific questions will be listed below with their respective answers:

1. What do you consider the most important aspects to take into consideration to ensure effective short learning programmes and for people with a wide range of learning needs to access them effectively?

Brief, but with sufficient information on the topic, following the latest theoretical, technological and technical trends. Providing in an interesting, accessible and understandable way. With MANDATORY opportunity for physical practice and assessment

2. What are the main difficulties and possible challenges for increasing access to short learning programmes? What engagement techniques could be used to address the difficulties and challenges mentioned?

The lack of digital skills in the more connected population of Bulgaria is a serious obstacle to online courses. This is a problem with access followed by the problem with content. Here, the interaction of training organizations with business is important to meet short-term and long-term needs in the labor market. Learners seek flexibility about training. If online courses provide face-to-face, then practical activities need to provide opportunities for all active age groups to participate - evening, Saturday-Sunday options.

3. What do you think might be the learning needs of different kinds of VET students and professionals entering this field?

All trainees expressed that they lacked quality training in soft skills, an appropriate complement to hard skills. Depending on the area of business, communication in tourism, problem solving practically by all, teamwork again practically by all, time management, emotional intelligence, digital skills, both basic and advanced were shared. Employers want more up-to-date theoretical knowledge (currently many deals with the practical after employment with on-the-job training). This is particularly important in high-tech business areas where change is extremely dynamic.

4. What do you think are the main benefits and possible impact for organisations/institutions providing learning opportunities to support the micro-credential movement? What is their potential?

With the implementation of most of the recommendations described above, vocational training has the opportunity to regain its former position in Bulgaria and meet the needs of the labour market. It requires desire, effort, time and money. Good interaction with employers will narrow the gap between supply and demand, avoid misunderstandings about knowledge and skills in the workplace, which will increase productivity with all the resulting positive consequences. On the other hand, micro-

credentials as a common European educational tool provide increased opportunities for labour migration, as harsh as this may sound, but Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU and this is a reality.

Portugal

In the barriers and needs some ideas concerning the way that the online training is presented were repeated. The participants said that if the training is not appealing for the target audience, or if they do not have in mind the different learning styles that can be a barrier.

The teachers and the business representatives said that one of the most relevant barriers could be the high prices attached to some of the short online pieces of training. It was said that some more technical aspects can be very expensive and that the people tend to not do or go to YouTube or other platforms to watch free tutorials on the matter.

Concerning the VET environment, all of the participants said that micro-credentials could be an asset. It was said that micro-credentials can open opportunities to have a more diverse type of learning, where students can be involved in learning the more general things in their course, and then learn more specific things (that match the student's likes) in the micro-credential training.

Teachers/trainers said that applying micro-credentials to the VET environment could improve the independence of the students, and develop their sense of responsibility, and maturity on them since they will be in charge of the type of extra learning that they want to pursue.

Italy

As stated, many times by the participant teachers, everything depends on the students. Usually, they work with students coming from difficult backgrounds both socially and economically. They provide long-term learning programmes and therefore, for them, it is really important to get to know each student and establish a connection in order to develop trust. In this way, it is possible to provide effectively training and education. Based on these assumptions, teachers stated that it is really hard to provide short-term, really focused learning programme without that trust building. Therefore, they stated that the best way to implement short-term learning programmes is with an older target group with specific needs for specific trainings. According to the VET trainee involved during the focus group, it is important to set specific goals and specific deadlines in order to involve the students nicely. It is important to present the results that will be achievable by short-term trainings and reward them to keep the students motivated and interested. Otherwise, it might be wise to implement micro-credentials trainings incorporated in other long-term curricula in order to engage the students easily and have them monitored and followed by the staff. Teachers believe that micro-credentials could be important in meeting the students with the job market, especially if they are looking for a specific certification of skill that it is required in their job or the job they want to obtain. Also, according to teachers, it is worth mentioning that institutions that will provide specifically short-term learning opportunities are at an advantage in relation to other VET centres or professional schools that may provide long-term training programmes as well as their main objective. Another important aspect is related to a "rewards strategy", teachers find that providing rewards for small gains and success keep the students motivated and eager to continue and learn more. This is best suited for short-term



programmes as well, since by providing rewards and useful certification in a small amount of time, this can keep the students interested and willing to do more and do better.

Luxembourg

Regarding the obstacles and challenges, managers believes that the biggest challenge is to align the educational process with the labor market. In addition, believes that the design and implementation of short-term learning programmes by company adds value to the company itself as it attracts better employees and keeps them informed.

The representative of the Consultancy Agency, agrees with the manager on the point that short-term learning programmes must meet the needs of the labor market. The involvement of companies in these programmes gives them the advantage of informing their employees with the latest market trends.

On the other hand, the VET provider believes that the main difficulties encountered by his institution so far are the socio-economic differences between the trainees as well as the accessibility of e-learning tools. The VET institution prefers asynchronous learning in order to involve learners from all social groups, while providing specially designed spaces on its premises for students to have access to educational equipment. Also, it is suggested a common accreditation system for short-term learning programmes and would like to learn more about the micro-credential policy and how micro-credential approach could become part of the formal education system.

The trainee stressed that in education in general and in vocational training in particular, emphasis is placed on the hard skills acquisition. It is therefore difficult for someone who does not have work experience to develop his/her soft skills and ends up with the need to create courses based on the development of soft skills. Finally, for younger trainee the biggest challenge is the e-learning content accessibility.



5. Promotion of Micro-credentials

Netherlands

All interviewees agree that the most successful strategy to promote micro-credentials would be to make the cooperation between VET colleges and companies more flexible, especially where curriculum and time tables are concerned. Participants warn that the mission colleges have concerning comprehensive development of students must not be hindered, though. Another opinion is that it would be a good idea to combine the learning process in a 5-day week in which for 3 days the school requirements are met, and for 2 days the companies are in the lead so that practice driven learning can be realized even better. Also, some have experienced that both teachers and professionals working together, find this an enriching experience, personally and professionally. Participants would like to take a step further and have all the education take place in company. The colleges should be more flexible, less afraid of potential risks and show more entrepreneurship and guts. This is a culture gap between schools and the industry that needs to be attended to.

Greece

The conversation acknowledged that learners should be motivated to get involved with such programs. The trainees agreed that the most important incentive for a learner is to actually connect with the job market. The professionals explained that such courses provide connections with industry professionals and create interfaces. However, there should be more channels with businesses or consulting firms for direct recruitment or internships. People engage in new topics and broaden their horizons for further specialization depending on the market's needs and gaps, which can be bridged by creating different specialties and job positions. Candidates also get the chance to evolve and acquire new skills that make them more competitive to earn a better income. What seems to be everyone's concern is that what needs to be done is an overall change of society's mindset to accept that not every profession requires a university degree. Business actors pointed out that training helps freelancers improve their skills, develop their business, and digitize their services. Online training annihilates distance and makes better conditions for both teachers and students. People can take up courses at their own time and pace. The expenses are also significantly less.

Bulgaria

Online training has several great advantages and should be relied upon when promoting such training courses to motivate more people to participate. They may not be the ideal option, but they are an alternative golden to be used at a time suitable for the learner, following his individual perception capabilities, eliminating distances and the lack of suitable training centers nearby. Establishing networks of training centres and business partners to conduct practical activities, tests and exams is the ideal option, but requires a lot of explanatory work.

Portugal

According to advisors on how to better support short-term study programs, the focus should be on the impact of micro-credentials on apprenticeship careers. VET providers bring into the discussion the advantages of micro-credentials in terms of cost and time efficiency. Finally, HR managers believe that certification is important for engaging stakeholders.



Italy

Teachers believe that in order to have a satisfactory, efficient and successful implementation of online trainings, there needs to be motivated students with age superior to the ones usually attending traditional high schools. Based on their experience, online trainings works best when there is no need for “human connection” and no need for the process of “trust building” among parties. Being “colder” as training tool, online education needs to be encouraged when the aforementioned conditions are met. However, short and focused training are definitively more successful and easier to implement than long online training which can results in loss of attention, loss of motivation and poorer results.

Luxembourg

According to the consultant for the better promotion of short-term learning programmes, emphasis should be placed on the impact that micro-credentials have on trainee’s career. The VET provider brought into the discussion the benefit of micro-credentials in terms of cost and time efficiency. Finally, the HR manager believe that the certification is very important for attracting stakeholders.



Summary and conclusions

In order to better understand the overall scope and result of the focus group activity carried out by the partnership, the summaries of all countries will be integrated into a single one. Each contribution will be taken into account in order to formulate a framework in which the consortium will move forward, it is of the utmost importance to start from the results of the focus groups since the experience, the suggestions and the current state of micro-credentials was gathered from the project's target groups. The results of the project must be in line with what will be useful for VET centres and VET trainers as well as the institution and organization which are capable and will work with micro-credentials. Therefore, what can be said about the conclusions emerged by the cross-country analysis of the focus groups results?

Overall, for each member of the consortium, the implementation of the activity went well, for some even better than expected. To interact with the participants was easy and insightful, participants were many and interested as well as from the correct target group. It was a bit harder to involve representative of companies, but they were involved as well. Participants stated satisfaction and interest both for this kind of activities and micro-credentials as a whole. Who had previous experiences stated a renovated interest in them, and whom didn't know what they were gained a new interest sharing suggestions and views.

When asked about needs for adopting micro-credentials, participants agreed that the first step in getting involved with micro-credentials is to investigate the job market and its needs so that people entering can fill certain gaps. The market should evolve just as society is constantly evolving, creating different needs and requirements. Different programs should be adapted to the learners' needs and be up to date. Short-term courses offering micro-credentials are suitable for people facing time, distance, and expenses restrictions. Micro-credentials provide a more focused and practical learning experience. VET providers have concluded that in a fast-paced world in terms of education, labor market and the skills required, micro-credentials could be the next big thing in education as long as it is possible to ensure that practice driven learning is provided in cooperation between educational institutions and the industry. However, during the Covid-19 crisis, many training organisations made attempts to switch to distance learning as a form of online training, but in general the results and feedback from learners are not very good. The vocational sector has additional difficulties related to the practical part of the training, which is more than mandatory and highly desired by employers, making online training even more difficult. Also, it is important to trust the institution and teachers carrying out the educational activities, and the distance learning most of the time made this difficult to happen. The most important is to take into consideration the needs of the audience and target group. There was also discussion about a reward strategy in order to better involve and motivate learners and trainees. It would be best if it would be possible to allow for more flexibility in school regulations, curriculum and time tables and adjust regulations better to the needs of professionals who are interested in acquiring micro credentials. However, this may be very difficult and hard to achieve even for the most influential organizations and institutions.

There are many challenges in adopting micro-credentials in VET. It is important to take into consideration both the different needs of the market as well as the candidates. The micro-credentials dynamic should cover those needs. A well-trained and capable workforce should bridge the gaps



created in the job market. Nevertheless, society does not have a clear view of short-term courses and micro-credentials, having the impression that a university-level certificate is much more efficient and reliable than a micro-credential. Possibly, the biggest challenge is the lack of quality online training materials, a program with hands-on activities, and an online and physical assessment system. The Covid-19 crisis has produced first results, but they are too few and in limited business areas, not covering the whole spectrum of professional training. A big challenge is also the adaptability of the curricula and the possibilities to practice on modern equipment.

Micro-credentials provide more efficient competencies that learners can implement in their everyday and professional life. These competencies respond to the needs of the constantly developing job market. Participants agreed on the importance of developing complementary skills. Most people are also interested in improving existing competencies. However, the market's intentions in accrediting these micro-credentials should be clearly stated. In some countries, restrictive regulations are a problem that needs to be solved. They prevent colleges from participating in more experimental projects together with the industry. They hinder the industry in their innovation and cooperation with colleges and educational institutions. And they make it less attractive for potential students to see micro credentials as a means for their development. The opportunities for a change in thinking and the implementation of new types of training programmes by vocational training centres are very great. It is required for the certification of new training programs, including distance ones to attract new learners. These programmes need to respond to local, regional and national labour market priorities and the requirements of employers, who in turn need to provide opportunities for practical activities. These practical activities could be in the form of dual training or by providing equipment in vocational training centres, to strengthen the role of mentors in practical activities, to acquire sustainable skills. The duration of courses needs to be revised and a mix of hard, soft and digital skills courses is strongly recommended. Some of the countries involved in the activity ranks in the latest places in Europe in terms of digital skills of the older working population, which is a significant barrier to learning new professions and opportunities for professional migration.

Short-term courses can be more inclusive and create better teaching and learning conditions. Minorities and people with special abilities and needs should be taken into consideration, to promote better teaching methods and content and increase their accessibility. Through user-friendly digital tools, online training can accomplish inclusion and accessibility. What was also extensively discussed is the adaptability of the teaching methodology. The training content should be planned according to both learners' and the market's needs. In a competitive vocational training market, the winner will be the one who manages to offer training that is equally useful for the trainee and the employer. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Many factors described by the feedback from the focus groups have to be taken into account - duration, difficulty, up-to-date content backed up with the relevant practical part on modern equipment, internationally recognized assessment system. The consortium must take into account the suggestions, concerns, feedback and ideas received in order to produce the best methodology possible and carry out the project successfully.



ANNEX I

Task 1.1 - Transnational Focus Groups

Guidelines for Conducting Focus Groups for the purposes of the MicroVET project

Developed by Know and Can, Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

The national focus groups will be formed based on a predefined agenda to address specific issues, focusing mainly on the verification of the needs analysis' results that the partnership has already carried out during the preparation phase. Attendees will participate in a discussion regarding current needs on digital content development, gaps in the provision of specialized courses, as well as their overall understanding of micro-credentials. Each transnational focus group will be held in a mixed format and attended by at least: -One VET/training provider per partner country -Two VET learners/trainees per partner country -Two business actors from each hosting country.

PRE-FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES:

Having in mind that the groups will be mixed the role of the facilitator in the process is crucial to ensure a balance of information provided by all three parties and take comprehensive notes on the discussion topics. Despite the recommendation for online focus groups, we recommend face-to-face ones wherever and when possible, which on the one hand allow the participation of a larger group of participants, but also facilitates monitoring the communication behaviour of the participants, intervening, supporting and guiding questions in order to gather the necessary information. Before conducting the focus groups, the following steps should be completed.

- Develop a clear and concise purpose description of what needs to be known and put on a discussion following the project application. In order for the sample to be representative, it is desirable that focus group participants are familiar with the topic in advance. Information can be sent out via emails or in person. For the partner organisations in advance will be sent a list of the information that needs to be collected from the focus groups.

- Develop the discussion questions – make sure they are clear, unambiguous and without bias. Have in mind that the level of confidence of different actors may need support.

- CESIE will develop the script to frame the purpose of the focus group. This script should be used when making invitations and when opening the session. A closing script should also be developed thanking the participants and reiterating how the information they provided will be used.

- Schedule the time, the place, duration, the necessary equipment, and set the ground rules and agenda for the focus group. If you decide to do at presence, ensure compliance with all precautions and the use of personal protective equipment depending on local legislation and moments restrictive measures. Also have in mind that you can do the focus groups in open places, giving possibility to everyone to participate.



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- Invite potential participants and get commitments to attend from them – remind them a day or two before the focus group. Try to keep the gender balance even for occupations with a gender priority.
- try to have focus groups in your country from as many business areas as possible, also remember that in different countries there were and still are different Covid restrictions, both in education and in production/services. How they have affected a particular business is also the subject of our study.

FACILITATING THE SESSION:

We recommend the following general steps that will comprise each focus group session.

- Open the session according to the scripts. Depending on the size of the group, the format (face-to-face or remote) you can prepare several scenarios and the approximate timing for the session.
- In case of online focus group make sure all cameras are on and you can observe, analyse and respond to verbal and non-verbal signals.
- Inform about the ground rules, the agenda, duration.
- Read the questions. Guide the discussion in the needed direction for the purposes of the survey.
- Ask for clarifications when needed.
- Make sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate on each question on a time-proportional basis.
- In an online format ask for permission and record the meeting (at least the audio), or take detailed notes in cases of personal attendance (audio record is a good option too).
- Close the session making a summarize and asking for questions and any clarifications needed
- Please note that in personal meetings and more participants the presence and active participation of a second facilitator is desirable.

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR:

Focus group facilitation is an art not a science, so care should be taken to follow the spirit and intent of the following guidelines and not to make them iron-clad rules. It is planned to have VET providers and trainees in each group. We encourage partners to invite trainees from a VET centre different from the one that is represented by a provider in order to have broader objective results from the focus group.

- Set a friendly and informal tone.
- Make all of the participants feel welcomed and relaxed.
- Get full answers by gently probing.
- Make sure everyone has the chance to participate. Ask those who have been quiet, if they have anything to add.
- Head-off any arguments or disagreements that might close down communication.
- Be neutral, open and non-judgmental in all verbal and nonverbal responses.

- Keep the conversation flowing and on track.
- Monitor the time and stay on schedule with the agenda.

POST FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES:

We recommend to do the following steps after the focus group has been held.

- The focus group facilitator(s) from the team working on the project, should subsequently develop the draft report based on the findings of the reviewers.
- The final report should be prepared and submitted following a preliminary agreed template provided by CESIE .

PARTICIPATION STANDARDS:

The requirements for the optimal number of Focus Group should be met – minimum 5 people in a group. Following the adherence to these, excludes the possibility of session failure, and ensures the collection of the necessary information for the purposes of the project, within the intended parameters of participant proportionality - One VET/training provider per partner country -Two VET learners/trainees per partner country -Two business actors from each hosting country.

- The Preferred Number of Confirmed Participants scheduled for a single Focus Group Session is 10-15.
- The Minimum Number of Confirmed Participants needed to schedule a single Focus Group Session will be 8.
- The Preferred Number of Actual Participants needed to conduct a single Focus Group Session is 5-10.
- The recommended Minimum Number of Actual Participants needed to conduct a single Focus Group Session will be 5. We are all aware of the Covid restriction measures and also the great commitment to a simultaneous online connection of all three focus groups. In the case of individual sessions, it is important to comment on the issues raised by the other two groups to close the training-to-work loop.

Level of analysis will be based on the number of Actual Participants in all Focus Groups conducted on the same topic.

- Fewer than 30 Actual Participants in all Focus Groups conducted on the same topic should be considered preliminary and subsequent research (survey, more focus groups, or individual interviews) will be necessary for validation and report release. If the results are released, the validity may be disclaimed.
- Thirty or more total Actual Participants in all Focus Groups conducted on the same topic - results should be considered final within the constraints of the project (geographic region, participant demographics, and scope of the research question).

ANNEX II

Task 1.2 - Current Status Report on Micro-Credentials

National Report Template for the Transnational Focus Groups

Developed by CESIE, Italy

Partner organisation: _____

Country: _____

Date: [when the focus group was organised] _____

Place and venue of the focus group: [If held online, please state the platform used and provide the link]

Please try to keep your report to a maximum of 4-5 pages long.

Write summary of answers to the questions asked during the focus group, pointing out a few key conclusions (refer also to section 8. Summary of the process and findings).

1. Introduction and general background

- a. A general picture of micro-credentials in your country. Are there any specific local approaches or definitions to highlight?
- b. Is there a specific policy or framework in the field?
- c. Are there any current initiatives in your country that support the advancement of micro-credential development and delivery?
- d. If there is something important to add on this subject

2. Methodology

- a. What steps did you take before organising the focus group?
- b. Was the focus group organised online or face to face?
- c. Did you also carry out individual interviews? If so, please provide details
- d. How were the participants recruited/invited?
- e. Did you face any challenges or difficulties in focus group organisation and how did you solve them?
- f. What information / materials did you provide to the focus group participants?



3. Description of focus group participants

- a. Please provide an overall description of the focus group participants¹, including group size, participants profile, background and gender, organisations reached (please complete the participant list – APPENDIX II).

4. Main themes/questions

The focus group questions are designed to: (a) investigate the topic of the uptake of micro-credentials that the MICROVET focuses on and provide concrete data (b) identify what are the current needs concerning digital content development c) identify the gaps in the provision of specialised courses, as well as participants' overall understanding of micro-credentials d) be relevant to the participants and (e) be open, so as to lead to in-depth responses and rich data.

General introductions, knowledge and setting the scene:

- a. General introductions: What organisation or institution do you represent? What is your role/profession/area of study? What is your work experience (study area, in the field of education and training or business)?
- b. What is your knowledge of micro-credentials?

As the group will be diverse, it is important to ensure understanding of the definition of micro-credentials to participants to avoid possible misunderstanding later on in the focus group.

Definition provided by the European Commission:

Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences, for example a short course or training. They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for their personal and professional development.

<https://education.ec.europa.eu/levels/higher-education/european-approach-to-micro-credentials>

- c. Have you or your organisation had experience of designing or carrying out short learning programmes? If yes, can you give some examples? If not, is there a specific reason why?
- d. Have you participated in short learning programmes? If yes, please can you provide information about the programme/s and your experience. If not, is there a specific reason why?
- e. Has your idea and perspective of short learning programmes changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If so, how?

¹ Each transnational focus group should be attended by at least one VET/training provider, two VET learners/trainees per partner country and two business actors from the partner/hosting country



Provision and services

- f. Does your institution have a policy/framework for recognising and accepting short learning programme micro-credentials for modules earned outside of the institution? Do you know of others in your city/region/country offering such services?
- g. What resources (funding, staff, digital development) does your institution need in order to better recognise and deliver flexible short learning programmes?
- h. What does it need (for your organisation) to get to equip itself with a valid strategy for adopting and making micro-credentials more sustainable?

Preference, design and development

- i. When thinking about flexible and adaptable learning methods, what would be your preferred content in online training e.g. video, text, quizzes, recorded classes or a hybrid of different content styles?
- j. What key features (technical and content) do you think could support learners to become active and more engaged in short learning programmes and what would be your preferred ones e.g. online tools for facilitating interaction and exchange of ideas with other learners, feedback and self-assessment, interactive assessment, student-centred learning environment?
- k. In terms of user-friendliness and accessibility, what would be your preferred device for accessing and taking part in online training e.g., smartphone, tablet, desktop computer?

Barriers and needs

- l. What do you consider the most important aspects to take into consideration to ensure effective short learning programmes and for people with a wide range of learning needs to access them effectively?
- m. What are the main difficulties and possible challenges for increasing access to short learning programmes? What engagement techniques could be used to address the difficulties and challenges mentioned?
- n. What do you think might be the learning needs of different kinds of VET students and professionals entering this field?
- o. What do you think is the fundamental element for their [micro-credentials] success and integration into current vocational education and training services? Do you think they can match the needs of the job market?
- p. What do you think are the main benefits and possible impact for organisations/institutions providing learning opportunities to support the micro-credential movement? What is their potential?
- q. What do you think could be a successful model/strategy?
- r. Based on your experience, what content would you like to learn more about concerning micro-credentials?



Promotion of micro-credentials

- s. What could be possible incentives to encourage and motivate the take up of online trainings?

Further information

- t. Any further comments or observations about the topic of micro-credentials?

5. Summary of the process and findings

- a. Overall impression of the focus group organisation
- b. Needs for adopting micro credentials in VET
- c. Challenges for adopting micro credentials in VET
- d. Opportunities and threats highlighted
- e. Ideas for developing successful micro credentials in VET (content, accessibility and promotion)
- f. Recommendations from participants
- g. Additional comments and overall conclusions

