

A European approach to micro-credentials: The Social Employers position



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Context

- On 20 April 2021, the European Commission launched a public consultation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. The main objective is to “collect ideas for the development of a common definition for micro-credentials, European Union standards for their quality and transparency and the next steps to be taken at the institutional, national and EU levels.”¹
- According to the working definition of the European Commission, a micro-credential is a “proof of the learning outcome that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards”.²
- Skills are a priority topic for the European Commission (the European Skills Agenda, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Council Recommendation on Vocational education and training, etc.). The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan states that currently under 40% of adults participate in any form of training every year. One of the Commission’s headline targets included in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is therefore to increase adult participation in training to 60%, to “*improve employability, boost innovation, ensure social fairness and close the digital skills gap*”³.
- The European Approach to micro-credentials is an initiative which is part of the [European Skills Agenda](#), a 5-year plan that aims at developing new skills according to the social, economic, digital, and environmental needs⁴.
- According to the Social Employers’ report on the Social Services Workforce in Europe⁵ and a survey recently done by the Social Employers on skills and training needs in the social services sector⁶, there is a general recognition of skills shortages, increased by the pandemic, in which services providers had to adapt quickly to be able to continue delivering their services, for example remotely. Developing certified new skills and training opportunities can help to ensure high quality services delivery and improve the attractiveness of the sector, which will in turn facilitate recruitment and retention of the workforce.

¹ European Commission: [A European Approach to micro-credentials](#)

² A European approach to Micro-Credentials: Output of the Micro-Credentials higher education consultation group: [final report](#) (2020).

³ European Commission: [The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#)

⁴ European Commission: [European Skills Agenda](#)

⁵ Federation of European Social Employers: [Social Services Workforce in Europe: State of Play and Challenges](#) (2019).

⁶ Ibid.

1. Opportunities of micro-credential for the social services sector

The social services sector is one of Europe's biggest job creators, directly employing 11 million staff in Europe (EU + UK), and representing 4,7 % of the total EU workforce.⁷

Despite the social and economic contribution of the sector and the growing demand due to demographic changes, social services face some major challenges, including the recruitment and retention of workers.

The development of a common definition of micro-credentials, and European Union standards for their quality and transparency could have an added value for the social services sector because:

- **Improving access to lifelong learning opportunities** is essential to train the existing workforce and develop their skills to enable them to have an evolving career in the sector. Access to further professional qualification opportunities can motivate workers, especially those with lower qualifications and a long period of working in the same job. This could avoid career re-orientation, early retirement, or emigration. In this regard, micro-credentials can offer solutions without the necessary time commitment of long-term training and education.
- **Recognising and valorising the knowledge and the skills of workers** can improve the attractiveness of an employer and in the long run help to retain an appropriately trained and skilled workforce.
- **Re-skilling and upskilling are important to meet current and future needs of the sector**, for example in the context of new models of care delivery (the move to community-based services), to be able to better manage crises in the future (e.g. training on safety protocols, managing psychosocial risk, etc.), to prepare for the digital and green transition as well as to deliver quality services.
- **Micro credentials give groups who are disadvantaged in the labour market - such as people with disabilities or migrants - quicker and easier access to paid work.** People who want to switch to the social services sector and who, as a breadwinner, cannot afford to do a lengthy training also benefit from micro credentials.

That is why the Social Employers supports this initiative to boost the recognition and value of micro-credentials, which can potentially be a useful tool for the social services sector's workforce, for newcomers to the sector and persons disadvantaged in the labour market, e.g. persons with disabilities and migrants, to update their knowledge, skills and competences.

2. The role of social dialogue and of social partners

- **Dialogue between the social partners at all levels is crucial** to assess challenges and needs related to skills and training in the social services sector, to increase service quality as well as job satisfaction.
- **Social dialogue can help to best respond to current and future challenges** by giving social partners the opportunity to shape and influence policies and decision-making processes. The opportunities of training and lifelong learning have already been highlighted by the Social Employers and EPSU in a [Joint Position Paper on Recruitment and Retention](#).
- It is important that social partners are **involved in the development of common European standards when it comes to micro-credentials**, because they have the best understanding of skills and training needs in their sector. For this reason, social partners can also play a role in the certification process.

⁷ Ibid.

3. The role of the EU

In the development of a common European approach to micro-credentials, the Commission should:

- **Take into consideration non-formal education providers and training opportunities within the workplace.** The Roadmap⁸ seems to focus more on the learning experiences issued by education and training institutions, however, non-formal education & training within the workplace should be included. In this regard, micro-credentials can provide a valuable assessment on the current skills and a validation of work experience.
- **Promote investment in the development of skills and training,** including in the validation of micro-credentials that target specific sectors suffering from labour shortage, such as the social services sector. Encourage Member States to make use of EU funds and facilitate access to funding.
- Make sure that the acquisition of micro-credentials is also **accessible to people with support needs** in the labour market.
- Ensure that all learning outcomes are valued in a clear and transparent way across EU member states and can be part of broader certifications.

The Federation of European Social Employers is the voice of employers in the field of social services at European level and has, according to Eurofound, the most significant employer's representativeness in the private sector part of social services. The Social Employers understand social services to comprise all care and support services, including for older persons, persons with disabilities, children, and other excluded or disadvantaged persons.

The Federation's objectives are to strengthen the position of employers in social services at European and national level, establish common positions between members, and negotiate with European Trade Union Associations, representing workers in social services. By doing so, the Social Employers contribute to quality service provision and quality jobs.

⁸ European Commission: [Micro-credentials – broadening learning opportunities for lifelong learning and employability](#)