Microcredentials – a new opportunity for lifelong learning?

Interim findings from Cedefop project on Micro credentials for VET and labour market learning

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Why a Cedefop-study on microcredentials?

- Recent research carried out on micro-credentials focus on **higher, academic education**.
- This overlooks the role of microcredentials in and for **vocational and professional education and training.**
- It overlooks the role of microcredentials outside formal education and training, **notably by companies and labour market sectors.**

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The challenge of defining Micro-credentials

- No agreed definition existed at the beginning of the study
- Existing definitions (from OECD, EU Commission etc..) point to **key characteristics** of microcredentials:

  - referring to learning over a limited time period and/or in a specific area
  - may form part of or adding to formal qualifications
  - potentially 'stackable' over time, adding to individual learning careers
  - given their limited size and focus, more flexible than traditional qualifications
  - frequently delivered in a digital form

- Do they represent a **genuinely new form of recognition** or not?

Cedefop project: Microcredentials (2021-23)

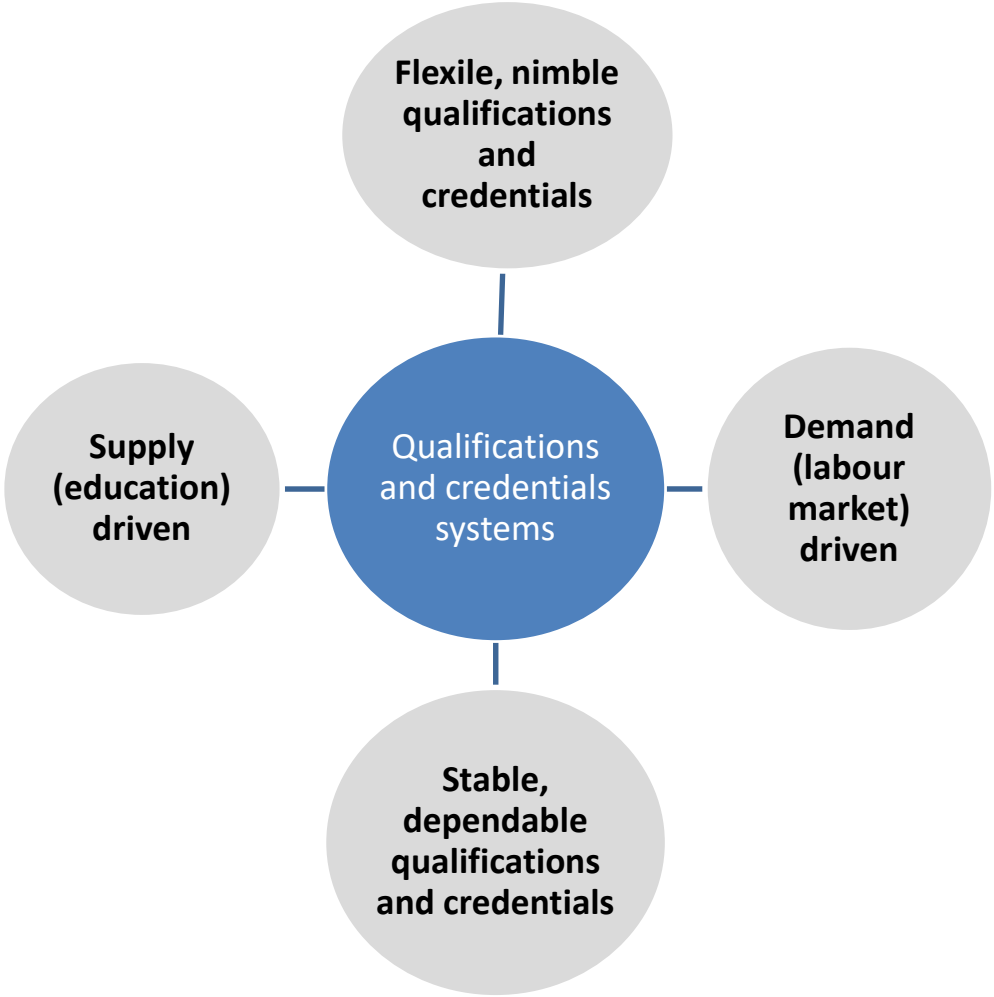
Three key objectives structured in three work assignments

Mapping Micro-credentials in European LM related education, training and learning

Microcredentials and evolving qualifications systems

Microcredentials and the added value for end users

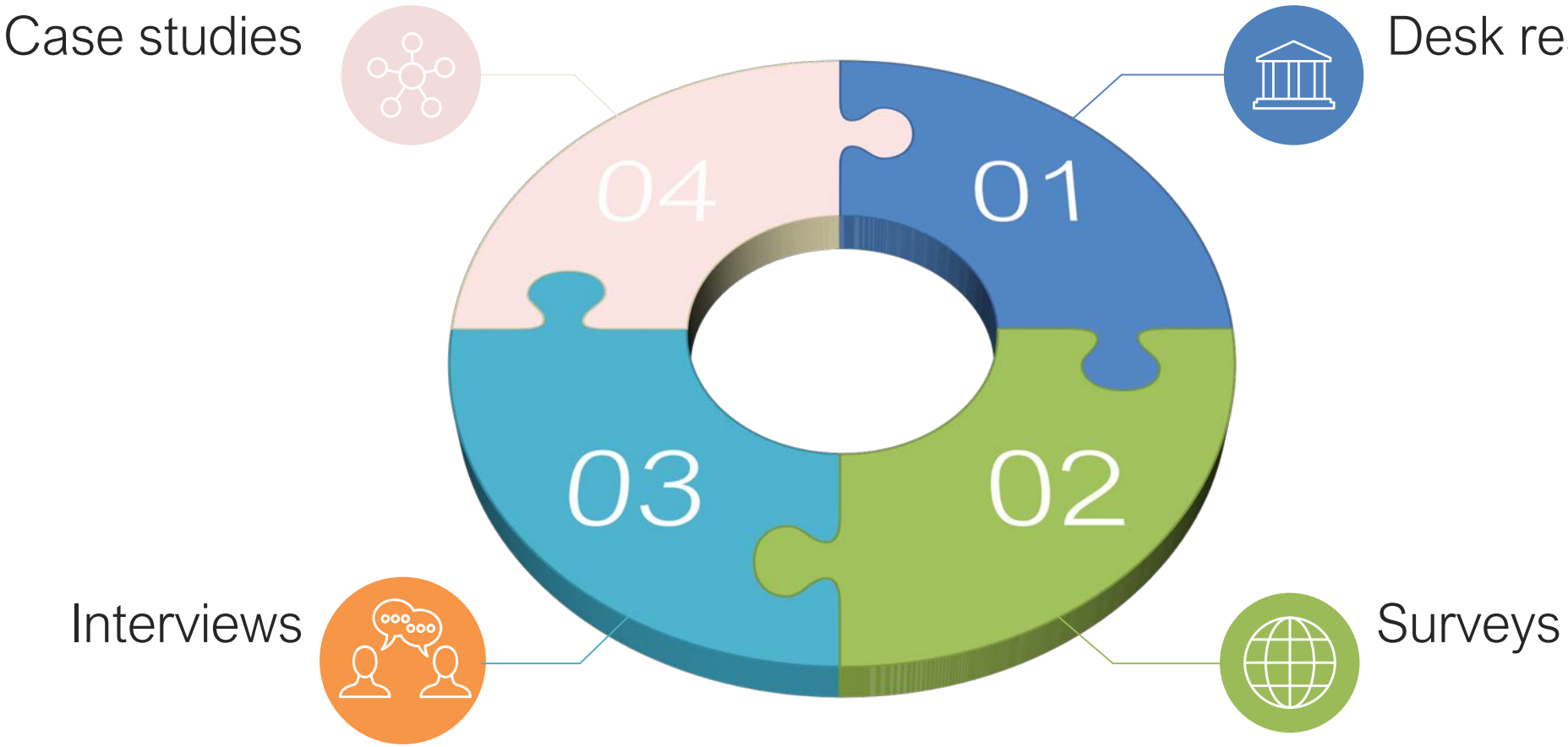
Dimensions of qualifications systems



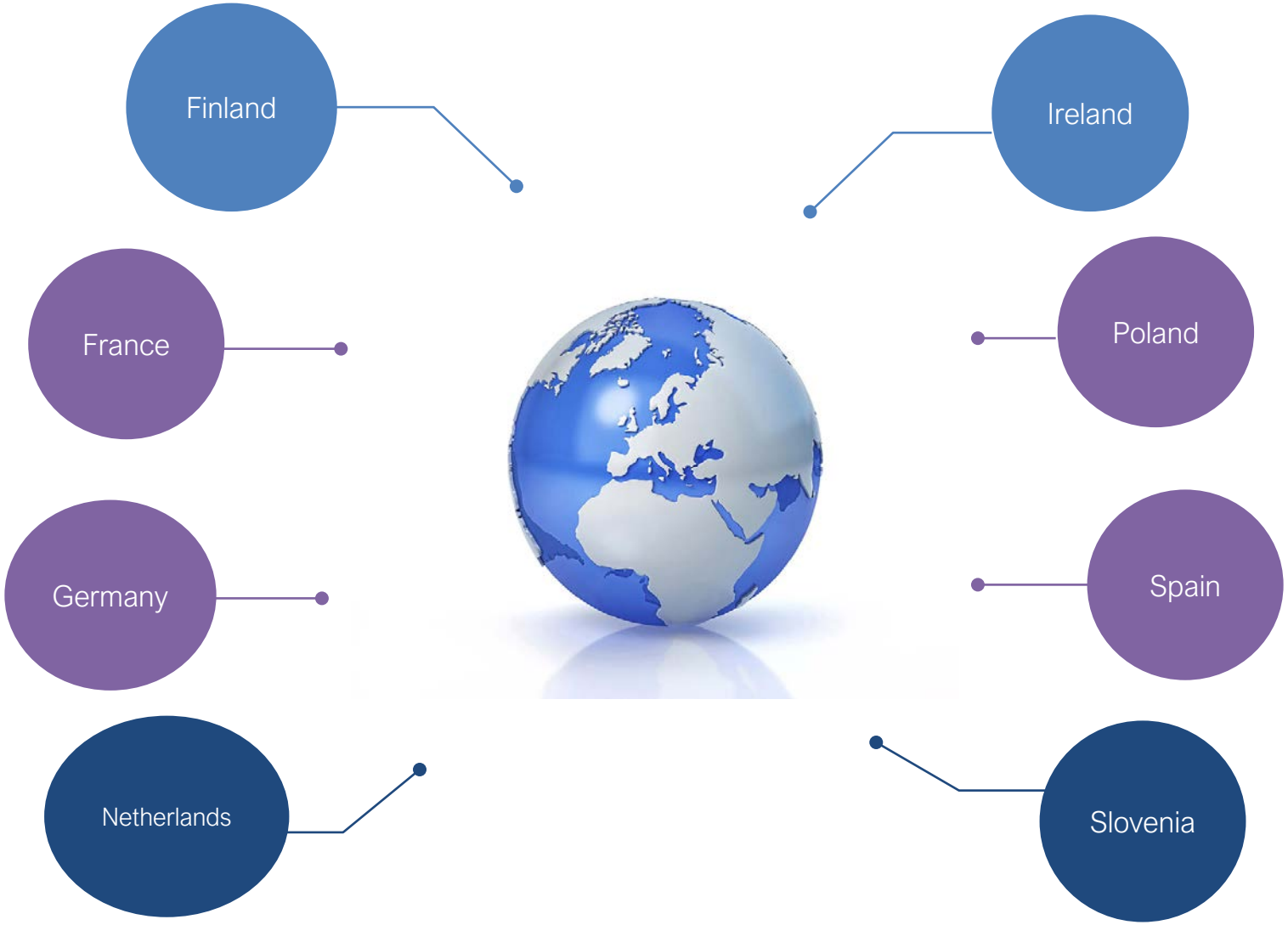
Source: Cedefop 2010

Presentation of methodological tools, findings so far

Methodological tools used in the implementation of the project



Case studies



Surveys

National authorities

22 countries

66% national authorities

11% qualifications authorities

4% quality assurance agencies

74 responses

187 responses

VET providers

26 countries

74% public providers

12% private non-profit providers

10% private for profit providers

37 responses

66 responses

Employer organisations

22 countries

37% employer associations

27% employer confederations

22% companies

Employee organisations

27 countries

53% trade unions

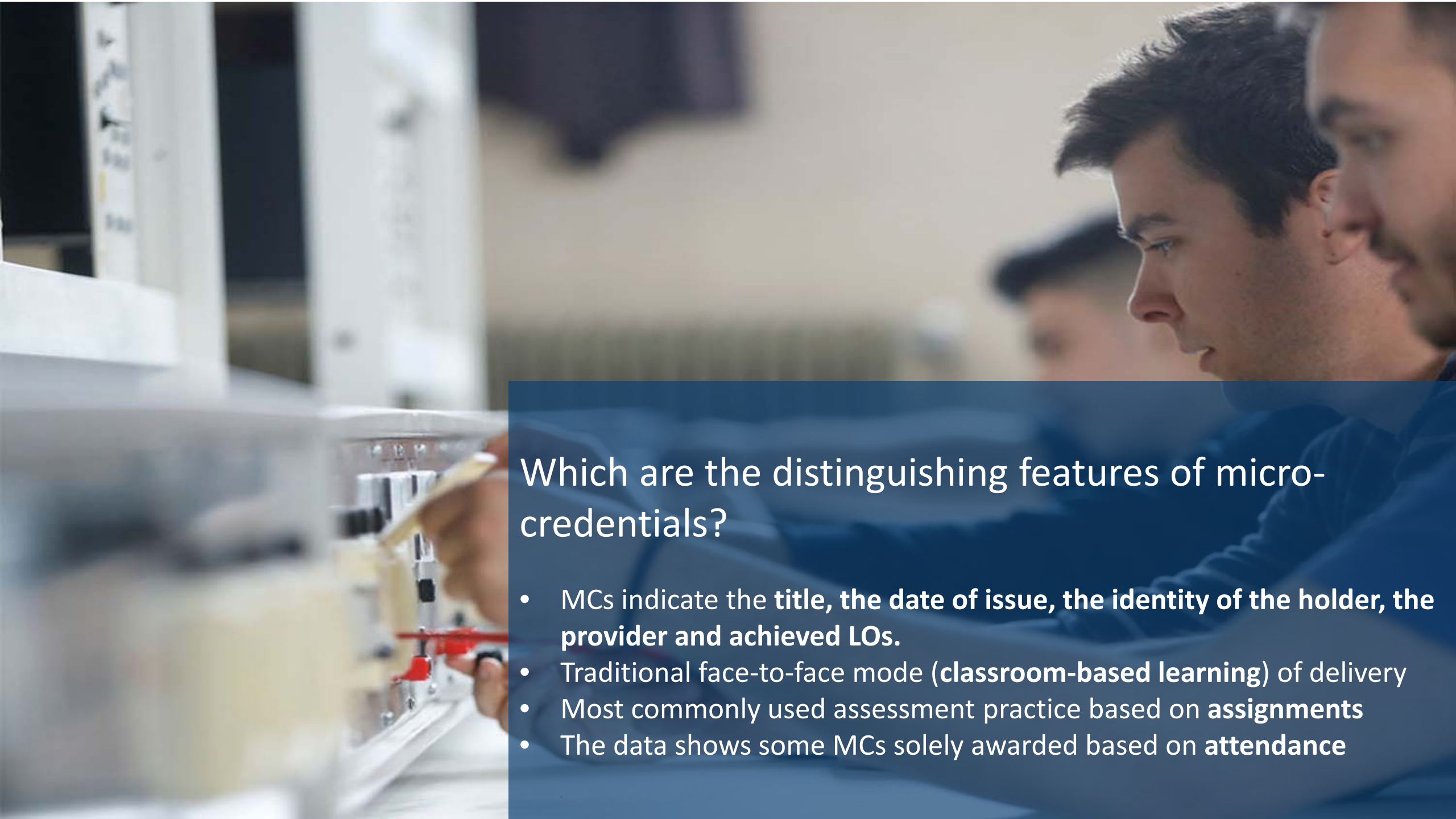
35% trade union confederations

Key findings from the survey programme

- **Uncertainty** linked to the **naming** and **function** of microcredentials;
- Emerging mostly in areas such as **ICT, engineering, manufacturing, and construction,** but also in sectors such as hospitality, human health, and social work;
- Clear benefits of microcredentials with regards to the **flexibility** and **responsiveness** to labour market needs;
- There also **needs to be a wider awareness** of microcredentials;
- **Quality assurance** of microcredentials is one of the most important aspects. However, **quality assurance processes differ** and not all MCs are quality assured based on the nationally established quality standards.

Purposes of microcredentials in national qualifications systems

Source: Survey of stakeholders representing national authorities



Which are the distinguishing features of micro-credentials?

- MCs indicate the **title, the date of issue, the identity of the holder, the provider and achieved LOs.**
- Traditional face-to-face mode (**classroom-based learning**) of delivery
- Most commonly used assessment practice based on **assignments**
- The data shows some MCs solely awarded based on **attendance**

How do micro-credentials fit in the labour market related education, training and learning?

- Microcredentials refer to **shorter learning activities.**
- Employers are concerned with the speed that the formal qualifications systems can identify skills needs and adapt training offers accordingly. They want a training where:
  - content is developed with **input from the labour market**;
  - content is responsive to the emerging needs in a more **agile** way;
  - is **shorter**, includes **hands-on learning** and is **integrated in workplace**
- The main **providers** of micro-credentials in the **labour market** include large companies, industry associations, start-ups, online learning platforms, non-governmental organisations and international organisations.

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Microcredentials in a nutshell

''Microcredentials are evidence of practical, flexible, on-demand, and short learning experiences. This is what makes them so attractive. Common European standards must preserve this attractiveness and not limit it through over - regulation and - formalization. It is thus central to find an appropriate balance between fostering trust and transparency as part of a common approach without compromising the flexibility of microcredentials''

Employers organisations survey, Germany

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Findings from the interview programme

MCs are not yet prominent in strategic policy documents. However, at national level there are initiatives and projects promoting MCs, as well as data collection and storage.

Even though most microcredentials operating in the labour market are not part of the formal qualifications system, there is a lot of sectoral and company-level activity

The main purposes of microcredentials are employability, upskilling and reskilling, lifelong learning, adult education and inclusiveness

There needs to be a balance between flexibility and standartisation of education and training

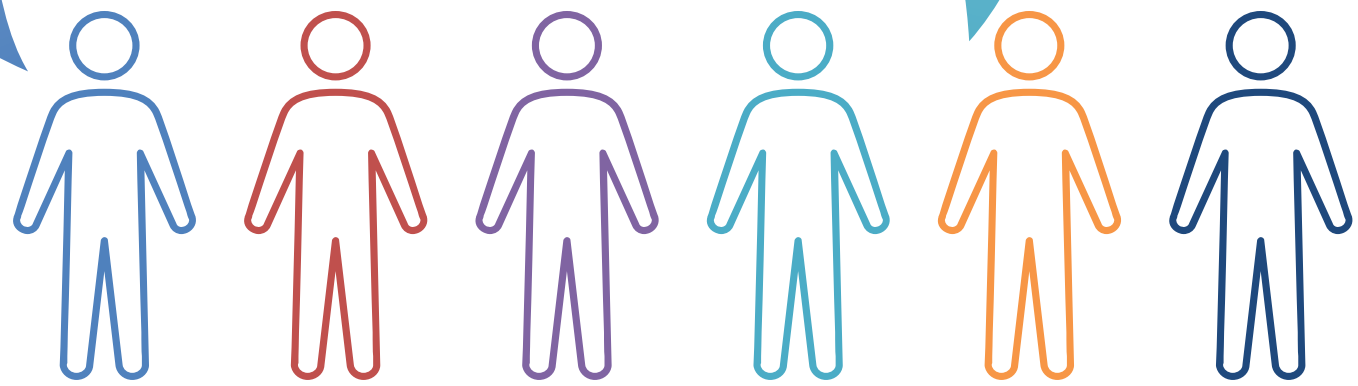
Case study findings

A term ‘microcredential’ is not commonly used in national contexts; terms like ‘open badges’ or ‘small volume certificates’ indicate that the actual phenomenon is real, the term MC is still not accepted or recognised

Majority of countries have qualifications systems which partly prevent easy integration of MCs; this may indicate that MCs are expanding outside formal QFs

Groups of learners engaged with MCs are more diverse than those engaged with full qualifications, including employees, new hires, individual learners, customers of a company

Initial VET (perhaps with the exception of Ireland and reflecting its highly modularised qualifications system structure) has yet to embrace MCs



Examples from case studies

Finland: The need driven by **skills gap**, mainly limited upskilling opportunities for adults and limited availability of short courses relevant to the labour market

France: The **concept is scarce**, whereas other related concepts are present (open-badges, block chains, block of competences, e-portfolio)- none of the few existing microcredentials – mainly in higher education – are in the National Qualifications Catalogue (RNCP)

Germany: Micro-credentials play a **minor role** compared to vocational education qualifications and are seen as supplementary to the existing system

Ireland: The **term** micro-credentials is **new**, but the qualifications authority (QQI) has been validating small volume courses and certifying the resulting learning with formal qualifications in the NFQ for many years

Examples from case studies

Netherlands: The Dutch VET policy was revised during the last government period (2017-2021) to prioritise **flexibilisation of educational programmes** for job seekers and employed adults as well as create more opportunities for lifelong learning

Poland: Microcredentials are still perceived as a **relatively new phenomenon** in Poland. They are popular in sectors specializing in the development of IT technologies (software development, computer systems administration and IT management)

Slovenia: Microcredentials **can potentially play a role** in labour market-oriented education and training that relate to national strategic development priorities, which are defined in the Smart Specialisation strategy

Spain: Employment authorities are preparing a **reform** of non-formal non-accreditable training for employment addressed to employed and unemployed workers that **will consider micro-credentials**, linked to the Catalogue of Training Specialities managed by the national PES

ReferNet questionnaires 2021

ReferNet questionnaires (December 2021)

The **aim** of this exercise was:

- ✓ To **improve our understanding** of the extent to which micro-credentials are known and used for VET and labour market purposes in the different countries;
- ✓ To provide an **important contribution to the data collection** carried out in the countries covered by the ongoing study.

The ReferNet data provides an important point for in-depth country research (a reality check)

ReferNet deliverable 3b - Observation of change

Based on the existing documentation, can you observe changes

(a) in the **qualifications/credentials landscape**;

(b) focusing on **VET and labour market learning**;

(c) zooming in on **2 sectors** related to the use of micro-credentials:

information and communication technology (ICT) and the **retail sector?**

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And finally (d), based on the above, which are your overall **observations** and **recommendations**?

Analysis of ReferNet replies I

26 replies received (still missing AT, IE)

A. Changes in the qualifications/credentials landscape

- ✓ The term 'micro-credential' is **relatively new** in the national education context, and it is not commonly used nor widespread nor has a univocal meaning.
- ✓ Its meaning depends on the **context** in which it is considered; circulating in a number of variations (micro-credential, micro-degree, micro-qualification, nano-degree, micro-master, badge …)
- ✓ A way to prove one's competence and qualification

B. Focusing on VET and labour market learning

- ✓ Use of credentials in **formal** and **non-formal VET** (vocational training courses, recognition of skills, but also the trainings within specific sectors)
- ✓ **Purposes**: easier recognition of skills, a shorter trajectory, flexibility, possibility to build up (stack) to a qualification may be more motivating
- ✓ Principle of **recognition** and **mutual trust** between education and training providers necessary

Analysis of ReferNet replies II

C. Zooming in on 2 sectors related to the use of micro-credentials: information and communication technology (ICT) and the retail sector

- ✓ **Examples offered in ICT**:
  - Providers exist in both the **public and private** sector and a large number of **international companies** offer continuing training options on the respective software programmes. They promote their various trainings with an **industry-recognised proof**.
  - **International certifications** used: ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence), ICDL (International Certification of Digital Literacy), EIPASS certificates (in Italy: mainly used by teachers for individual training paid by the teacher card financed by the Ministry of Education).
- ✓ **Examples in Retail sector**:
  - In LV, employees are being trained in VET institutions, universities of applied sciences and universities; supply of short-term training courses initiated by companies (for example: MAXIMA training centre, IKI Academy)
  - In FI, the Hygiene passport, is designed to promote food safety by mandating food industry workers to prove their knowledge of basic food safety issues (the hygiene passport has a significant role in the grocery retail sector as well as the first aid certificate and the occupational safety card).

Analysis of ReferNet replies III

D. Overall observations and recommendations

"For all short training and education courses or programmes that comply with characteristics of micro-credentials, **the trust depends on the quality of the content** as well as on the **issuer** and **provider** and **market success**. "

Reply from Slovenia

"Inclusion is a priority in the French Community but it cannot be achieved at any cost. The development of micro-credentials could generate **strong competition** between providers and constitute a **real risk of marketisation of education/training**. Member States must be given a seat in any discussions and decisions concerning the future development of micro-credentials."

Reply from Belgium French-speaking community

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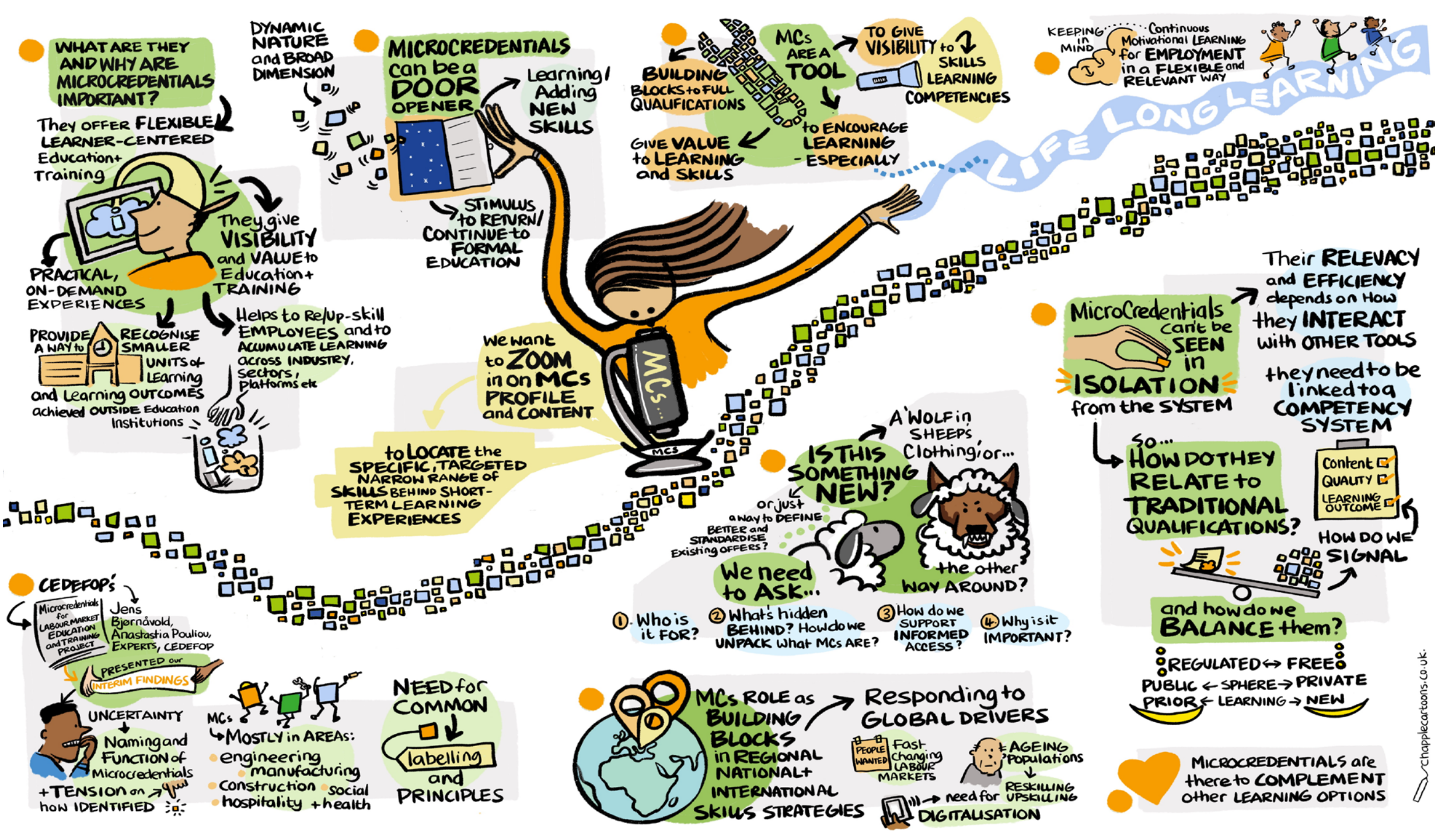
Issues raised/concerns from MS

- Area of **conceptual conflict** in relation to holistic understanding of education and training and modularising MC approach
- Relation between MCs of **different education sectors**. Does the current approach of MC apply to all education sectors, i.e. vocational, general and higher education as well as continuing education?
- Role of **social partners**, funding, accreditation, certification and recognition standards
- Contradiction of learning outcomes approach and application of **input-criteria** time expressed by the terms “short” or “micro”.
- **Development of EQF**: developing from a qualifications framework into a credentials framework?
- Danger of **overregulation** and **bureaucratisation** of the continuing education market

- MCs '**tend to fly under the radar**' so using a '**microscope**' could help zoom in on the profile and content of microcredentials;
- Microcredentials are **not objectives** in themselves. They are **tools:**
  - ✓ Tools for making learning - and skills, competences acquired through learning- **visible**.
  - ✓ Tools to give **value** to the same learning, knowledge and skills, competences
  - ✓ Tools to **encourage learning**, **motivate** individuals to develop in a lifelog and life-wide perspective.
- They **cannot be seen in isolation** – not free-standing instruments;
- Microcredentials are awarded by a **diversity of stakeholders** operating at different levels and institutional contexts;
- Need to find an appropriate **balance** between fostering trust and transparency

More information and relevant documentation at the event's webpage


WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE MICROCREDENTIALS IMPORTANT?
They offer FLEXIBLE LEARNER-CENTERED Education+ Training
They give VISIBILITY and VALUE to Education+ TRAINING
PRACTICAL, ON-DEMAND EXPERIENCES
Helps to Re/up-skill EMPLOYEES and to ACCUMULATE LEARNING across INDUSTRY, sectors, platforms etc
PROVIDE A WAY to RECOGNISE SMALLER UNITS of Learning and Learning OUTCOMES achieved OUTSIDE Education Institutions
DYNAMIC NATURE and BROAD DIMENSION
MICROCREDENTIALS can be a DOOR OPENER
Learning/ Adding NEW SKILLS
STIMULUS to RETURN/ CONTINUE to FORMAL EDUCATION
BUILDING BLOCKS to FULL QUALIFICATIONS
MCs ARE A TOOL
TO GIVE VISIBILITY to SKILLS LEARNING COMPETENCIES
to ENCOURAGE LEARNING - ESPECIALLY
GIVE VALUE to LEARNING and SKILLS
KEEPING IN MIND
Continuous Motivational LEARNING for EMPLOYMENT in a FLEXIBLE and RELEVANT WAY
LIFE LONG LEARNING
We want to ZOOM in on MCs PROFILE and CONTENT
MCs...
to LOCATE the SPECIFIC, TARGETED NARROW RANGE of SKILLS BEHIND SHORT-TERM LEARNING EXPERIENCES
MicroCredentials can't be SEEN in ISOLATION from the SYSTEM
Their RELEVACY and EFFICIENCY depends on How they INTERACT with OTHER TOOLS
they need to be linked to a COMPETENCY SYSTEM
Content
QUALITY
LEARNING OUTCOME
so... HOW DO THEY RELATE to TRADITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?
HOW DO WE SIGNAL
and how do we BALANCE them?
REGULATED ↔ FREE
PUBLIC ← SPHERE → PRIVATE
PRIOR ← LEARNING → NEW
IS THIS SOMETHING NEW?
A 'WOLF in SHEEPS Clothing' or...
or just a way to DEFINE BETTER and STANDARDISE Existing OFFERS?
the other WAY AROUND?
We need to ASK...
1. Who is it FOR?
2. What's hidden BEHIND? How do we UNPACK What MCs ARE?
3. How do we SUPPORT INFORMED ACCESS?
4. Why is it IMPORTANT?
CEDEFOP's
Microcredentials for LABOUR MARKET EDUCATION and TRAINING PROJECT
Jens Bjornåvold, Anastastia Pouliou, EXPERTS, CEDEFOP
PRESENTED our INTERIM FINDINGS
UNCERTAINTY
Naming and FUNCTION of Microcredentials
+TENSION on how IDENTIFIED
MCs MOSTLY in AREAS:
engineering
manufacturing
construction
social
hospitality
+health
NEED for COMMON labelling and PRINCIPLES
MCs ROLE as BUILDING BLOCKS in REGIONAL NATIONAL+ INTERNATIONAL SKILLS STRATEGIES
Responding to GLOBAL DRIVERS
PEOPLE WANTED
Fast Changing LABOUR MARKETS
AGEING Populations
RESKILLING UPSKILLING
need for DIGITALISATION
MICROCREDENTIALS are there to COMPLEMENT other LEARNING OPTIONS
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