

EFFE's recommendation on the Roadmap dealing with micro-credentials – broadening learning opportunities for lifelong learning and employability

On July 1st, 2021, the European Commission presented first reflections the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience, a 5-year plan that aims at helping individuals and businesses develop new skills according to social, economic, digital, and environmental issues¹. Among other actions, the Agenda announced tools and initiatives to support people in their lifelong learning pathways, including a European approach to micro-credentials.

Whilst flexibility has become a strong asset on the labour market, **the EU needs to ensure that all learning outcomes are valued in a clear and transparent way**. Considering the increasing number of workers looking for up- and reskilling opportunities throughout their entire lives, more and more personalised learning pathways are available to meet individuals' needs. In this respect, the European Commission defines micro-credentials as documented statements that acknowledge a person's learning outcomes, which are related to small volumes of learning and that for the user are made visible in a certificate, badge, or endorsement (issued in a digital or paper format)². They are particularly relevant for workers since they allow them to accumulate transversal skills acquired outside formal education and training schemes and to strengthen their attractiveness on the changing labour market. However, the lack of European standards remains the principal barrier to deliver the full potential of this innovative approach and explains the limited trust that limits their value.

According to the Roadmap published by the Commission, micro-credentials should complement traditional learning pathways, while reaching new types of learners³. This inclusive approach is particularly relevant for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are often characterised by their low qualifications, and is in line with the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL). Nevertheless, a paradox appears between the objectives of the approach and the mechanisms targeted for its implementation. The Roadmap seems to focus more on learning pathways provided by EU level providers, such as European Universities and Centres of Vocational Excellence. Still, there is a wide range of training and certification providers delivering qualifications, mainly in the field of VET, lifelong learning, and adult learning, often labour market-oriented, which should be included as well.

Despite the European guidelines provided by the Cedefop, VET arrangements remain very heterogenous in the EU⁴. They vary according to the different National qualifications systems (NQF) and do not offer the same quality and standards. However, **Member States share a growing interest in the diversification of training policies towards lifelong learning**. The latter is mainly based on the social and economic values of VNFIL, which promotes mobility and efficiency, supports disadvantaged groups, and addresses sectoral needs on the labour market.

Personal and Household Services (PHS) workers are often not included in traditional learning pathways. Whilst they are located at the limit of the informal economy, they do not benefit from a good

¹ European Commission. (2020). European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. Available at: [IMMC.COM%282020%29274%20final.ENG.xhtml.2_EN_ACT_part1_v8.docx](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12858-Micro-credentials-broadening-learning-opportunities-for-lifelong-learning-and-employability) (europa.eu).

² Ibid.

³ European Commission. (2021). Micro-credentials – broadening learning opportunities for lifelong learning and employability. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12858-Micro-credentials-broadening-learning-opportunities-for-lifelong-learning-and-employability>.

⁴ Cedefop. (2011). The benefits of vocational education and training. Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5510_en.pdf.

access to training schemes and often suffer from a lack of professionalisation. PHS workers are often middle-aged and low-qualified women⁵, who deal with a large range of care and non-care activities, and yet, **most of them do not benefit from any guidance and support to identify existing VNFIL opportunities**. In other words, more than 6,3 million declared employees, i.e. 3,4% of total employment in the EU-27, still struggle to increase their rights and salaries (9,5 million if we include undeclared workers)⁶. It reduces the attractiveness of an essential sector, which social dimension has been highlighted by the health crisis across Europe, whether by caring for the children of parents whose professional activity is essential or by keeping dependent people at home.

Within this context, micro-credentials can be a powerful driver for the professionalisation of the PHS sector and other with similar characteristics. Some Member States have already implemented tailored learning pathways for PHS workers, through the development of micro-credentials, which segment qualification and aims at fostering the access to certification.

According to the Ad-PHS project, the **Netherlands** count around 435.000 PHS workers⁷. Considering the lack of career development opportunities, the National VPL Knowledge Centre has developed an innovative process based existing tools such as the **BeroepsOverstijgende Competentiestructuur** (BOC) to validate non-formal and informal learning acquired by PHS workers. Focusing on transversal skills, this framework allows the validation of labour market-oriented micro-credentials and fosters the employability of many national and foreign domestic workers. Whilst giving them access to professionalisation, this system promotes declared work.

In **France**, the figures show that 3.4 million individuals employ almost 1.4 million employees to meet their daily home needs. They spend €8.7 billion in wages per year (€11.7 billion including social security contributions) and report 1.6 billion worked hours⁸. The latest VET reform in France encouraged the development of **skill blocks**, "a coherent set of skills to meet a professional activity"⁹ including **digital skills** (mainly related to the job search) and **green skills** (eco-responsible good practices). These blocks allowed to start in 2020 a brand-new approach to test validation of non-formal and informal learning (VAE "validation des acquis de l'expérience"): the so-called "**block-based VAE**". This specific VAE is especially relevant for workers with a highly targeted experience covering one or several blocks, who wish to acquire progressively the full qualification or just complete their pathway with some specific skills. Block-based VAE shares a similar approach to micro-credentials, based on specific competences and aiming at professional recognition and employability, which can be a basis for the future EU approach.

Therefore, EFFE urges the European Commission to:

- **Foster the diversification of training policies towards lifelong learning** and promote the micro-credentials within VNFIL.
- **Finance the validation of labour-market oriented micro-credentials** that target specific sectors suffering from labour shortage such as the PHS sector.
- **Include learners and workers from disadvantaged backgrounds** among the beneficiaries of micro-credentials.

⁵ 52,6% are 50 years-old or more and 88,3% are women, *Observatoire des emplois de la famille, Rapport annuel du secteur des particuliers employeurs et de l'emploi à domicile*, 2020 Edition, p. 27.

⁶ Lebrun, Jean-François (2020): la complexité des estimations du nombre d'emplois générés par le travail domestique en Europe, report commissioned by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

⁷ Ad-PHS. (2021). Country report Netherlands. Available at: https://ad-phs.eu/ht8ag2/uploads/2020/12/cr_netherlands.pdf.

⁸ FEPEM. (2020). Les chiffres clés. Available at: <https://www.fepem.fr/les-chiffres-cles-emploi-a-domicile/>.

⁹ LOI n° 2018-771 du 5 septembre 2018 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel. Available at: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037367660/>.