

Towards a universal definition of micro-credentials

A UNESCO-commissioned report

1. What is this project designed to achieve?

Micro-credentials are increasingly promoted as a new and more flexible way of recognising knowledge, skills and competences. However, progress with micro-credentials is negatively affected because there is no one universally recognised definition that clearly communicates to the lay user – particularly learners and employers – what micro-credentials are. In recent years, many agencies, scholars and educational entities have produced their own definitions, advancing scholarship in the area, and sometimes causing more confusion. This project attempts to address this definitional problem: it provides an analysis of the definitions published in recent policy documents to discover those characteristics most frequently cited (these might be deemed ‘essential’ elements), and those characteristics less frequently cited (‘optional’ characteristics). Working with a global panel of invited experts, **this project will propose a universal definition of micro-credentials**, based on the above analysis, and intended primarily for learners and employers across regions and sectors. This universal definition is not intended to replace existing definitions¹: it is intended as a reference point for future definitions and communication strategies so that micro-credentials are designed and marketed in ways that increase learner and employer value and trust. The proposed definition of micro-credentials is not a stand-alone; it comes as part of systems of definitions and concepts. The final report will include **brief case studies** that exemplify the variety of micro-credentials that fit the proposed universal definition across four sectors (higher education, vocational education and training, continuing professional development and the work of non-government organisations among vulnerable communities).

The outputs from this project will be:

- **A position paper** (executive summary; policy analysis and proposed universal definition of micro-credentials; brief case studies on micro-credentials);
- **A webinar** to disseminate and discuss the findings of the position paper.

2. Who is involved?

Under the overall authority of the Director of the Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems of UNESCO Education Sector (ED/PLS), and the direct supervision of the Chief of Section of Youth, Literacy and Skills Development (ED/PLS/YLS), a **project lead (Prof. Beverley Oliver)** has been commissioned to deliver the outcomes. The project lead will enlist a **global panel of experts on micro-credentials**. The project lead is tasked with selecting micro-credential definitions for analysis based on a review of relevant documents. These will be **limited to micro-credential definitions published in policy documents in the last seven years** to ensure that such definitions have reach beyond a single individual’s opinion, and that there has been a degree of regional or sectoral consultation in their production. As far as possible, policy documents will reflect regional and sectoral diversity. It is expected that these criteria will limit the sample to fewer than twenty definitions of micro-credentials (or similar terms such as alternative credentials). The project lead will author the first draft of the analysis and compose the suggested universal definition and work with the expert panel to refine these outputs and arrive at a consensus statement, if possible. The final report will clearly indicate where consensus has and has not been achieved.

Criteria for invitation of experts: With a view to achieving gender, regional and sectoral diversity, invited experts will be representatives of international organisations, national/regional qualifications authorities, NGOs, foundations, professional bodies and scholars who have authored, or contributed to micro-credential publications of regional or sectoral impact. Ideally, the expert panel will represent these regions (UK, Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Oceania, Asia) and these sectors (higher education, TVET, professional bodies, NGOs).

¹ This exercise is preliminary as UNESCO adopts norms through its governing bodies. The above work will be about informing a corporate definition.

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Expectations of experts:

- Experts are expected to contribute constructively, work collaboratively and promptly towards consensus, and maintain confidentiality about any feedback from other experts.

What experts can expect from the project

- Participation is only by invitation from the project leader. Experts may also be invited to participate as panelists in the webinar.
- The final report will be a single author publication (project leader), and those experts who confirm their consent will be acknowledged in the Appendix as members of the expert panel (title, name and affiliation). Experts may withdraw from the project at any time up until the deadline for final submission for publication.
- Experts will not be identified for their individual feedback in any part of the final report.
- Financial compensation is not available to expert panel members.
- Experts can provide their feedback by email, or by Zoom (which may be small group meetings if convenient). Every effort will be made to accommodate time zones and ensure reasonable working hours for experts and for the project leader (who is based in Melbourne). Because of the short timeframe, deadlines will need to be strictly observed.

3. When will this happen?

UNESCO expectations of a final report by **early August 2021** mean that timelines are tight. However, given that the final document will be brief, and those involved are experts in the field, this timeframe is seen as achievable.

Key tasks	June			July				Aug
Enlist expert panel (Expert Task 1)	16/6							
First draft proposed definition to experts (PL*)	16/6							
Feedback from experts (Expert Task 2)		23/6						
Redraft proposed definition/consensus (PL)			30/6					
Expert contribution: case studies (Expert Task 3)				07/7				
Final draft to experts (PL)					14/7			
Final feedback from experts (Expert Task 4)						20/7		
Final draft submitted to UNESCO (PL)							27/7	
Final report submitted to UNESCO (PL)								7/8
Preparation of webinar (PL)								7/8

*PL = project lead

Expert Tasks and deadlines in more detail:

- **Expert Task 1:** Agree to participate in the project by email, and (optionally) suggest other experts and publications that fit the above criteria (**DEADLINE: 16 June 2021**)
- **Expert Task 2:** Aiming for consensus, provide feedback on the proposed definition of micro-credentials, highlighting language that may be interpreted differently by region or sector. (**DEADLINE: 23 June 2021**)
- **Expert Task 3:** Provide links to examples from their region and sector that exemplify the variety of micro-credentials that fit the proposed definition. (**DEADLINE: 7 July 2021**)
- **Expert Task 4:** Read the final draft and confirm that they wish to be named and acknowledged as members of the expert panel in the final project report. (**DEADLINE: 20 July 2021**).