**Session Title:** Open Futures for Micro-credentialing  
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**Type of Proposal:** Webinar Presentation  
**UNESCO OER Recommendation Action Area:** Developing supportive policy

This session will address the UNESCO OER Recommendation Action Area related to policy development by connecting the dots between the emerging micro-credential ecosystem and the principles of open education. The session proposes to engage the global open education community in a visioning session to draw parallels between open principles and the growing global interest in alternative recognition and micro-credentialing. Examples of open micro-credentialing approaches will be shared and participants will be asked to contribute to a co-creation activity to generate a set of principles that chart a path forward that is grounded in the values of the open education community.

Micro-credentialing has recently become a hot topic in policy and education. To many, this emphasis on granular recognition of skill and competency-based learning seemed to emerge overnight, caused principally by the economic, technological, social, and political shifts of an international public health crisis. However, alternative forms of recognition have deep roots in open education, open source technology and systems, and open practice. From this perspective, micro-credentials can be considered the current expression of what has been an ongoing effort to improve education across the lifespan. Many decades of research and thought leadership in alternative pathways, self-directed learning, gamification, and lifelong learning have, and will continue to, contribute to the evolution of this field. Developments such as open recognition, qualifications registries, and the laddering of MOOC offerings into formal programs further extend this landscape.

A concrete example of a recent project addressing open micro-credentials in Europe is the Open Virtual Mobility (OpenVM) Erasmus+ project (2017-2020). The project’s aim was to promote and scale up Virtual Mobility (VM) in Higher Education (HE) through achievement, assessment, and recognition of VM skills in line with principles of Open Education. Virtual Mobility is understood as

> a form of learning which consists of virtual components through a fully ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge. (Bijnens et al., 2006, p. 26).

The nine OpenVM partners identified VM practices in terms of ‘shades of openness’ – from formal VM (through institutional agreements and virtual internships), through semi-formal VM (recognition of credits for MOOCs), to informal VM (Open Education Practices, OERs and international collaborations through social learning networks).

Based on a framework of Open Virtual Mobility skills developed by the partners, the project produced a series of eight mini-MOOCs. The MOOC content consists of learning activities articulated around OERs, all of which went through a strict quality assessment process prior to inclusion. Each mini-MOOC addresses one of the competency domains and leads to a micro-credential (in the form of both an open badge and a digital certificate) for each of the three levels – foundational, intermediate and advanced. Any learner can self-assess their OpenVM skills using a dedicated tool, decide which skills they want to develop further, and obtain one or more of the 24 associated micro-credentials endorsed by EDEN.
(European Distance and E-learning Network). To date, over 5 000 learners have followed one or more of the mini-MOOCs and nearly 2 500 micro-credentials delivered.

One of the major challenges encountered by the project was in defining appropriate assessment methods. Automated assessment such as quizzes enable the MOOCs to be as open as possible but have their limitations in terms of actually validating the acquisition of skills and competences. To obtain the advanced level micro-credential, learners are thus required to develop a reflexive e-portfolio which is then peer-assessed. However, the logistics of this require a significant number of learners at the same stage in each of the advanced level mini-MOOCs at the same time, which resulted in a shift back towards more formal learning contexts where this could be guaranteed (Buchem et al., 2020). The project also noted cultural differences in attitudes and practice towards peer-assessment, and the need for learners to be supported in both developing and assessing e-portfolios (Casanova, 2020). We would thus welcome discussion and exchange on addressing this issue of assessment in the context of open micro-credentials, an issue also being taken up by a further Erasmus+ project ECCOE (European Credit Clearinghouse for Opening up Education).

In the Canadian context, micro-credentials have largely emerged as a higher education offering, where discussions on their development, recognition, and portability have centred the post-secondary sector as principal actor, with some collaboration with industry and professional associations. With Canadian higher education being a provincial government responsibility, there is variation between provincial higher education sectors in approaches, definitions, and level of government oversight and involvement in microcredentials. This presents both a challenge and opportunity for shifting the conversation from the funding and development of microcredentials, to one that considers the broader ecosystem of recognition outside of higher education, openness, equity, prior learning and assessment.

The session will reflect on some of the opportunities and challenges ahead of the global open education community in terms of the growing interest in alternative recognition of learning and will seek to draw on existing examples in the field to co-create a set of principles that could be leveraged to influence future policy in this area.

References

