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**Summary Note on an
Interregional
Consultation for
a Southern African
Regional Framework on
Microcredentials**

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Abbreviations

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AU	African Union
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ETF	European Training Foundation
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
EU	European Union
HEC	Higher Education Commission
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
MICROBOL	Microcredentials Linked to the Bologna Key Commitments
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
PoMiSA	Potential for Microcredentials in Southern Africa
SADC	Southern African Development Countries
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
SAQAN	Southern African Quality Assurance Network
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
QAA	Quality Assurance Agencies

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies, automation and global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Cirlan and Kelo 2022, cited in Vita Global, n. d.:25), has highlighted the need to better align knowledge and skills with job requirements and to promote lifelong learning. Microcredentials, viewed as a rapid solution to skills mismatches, offer the possibility of flexible, learner-centered, agile responses to skills needs (QAA, 2022:6). Additionally, microcredentials are recognised for their potential for enhancing lifelong learning, skills development, accessibility and linking education with employment. However, microcredentials are also criticised by stakeholders in higher education for potentially undermining traditional education (Manyukwe, 2025). Similarly, concerns persist about inconsistent definitions (UNESCO, 2022:8), lack of standardization and quality assurance, and the potential to confuse or mislead stakeholders. There is also skepticism regarding the effectiveness of microcredentials in promoting employment and their accessibility to disadvantaged learners. Established education providers are concerned that unregulated microcredentials might have the potential of devaluing formal qualifications and diverting funding (Manyukwe, 2025). Whilst global organisations and governments are currently exploring and implementing the introduction and recognition of microcredentials, comprehensive research on this phenomenon, and specifically on the impact of microcredentials, is still quite limited.

As the name signifies, microcredentials are short, focused learning opportunities, which are designed to equip learners to meet their personal, societal, cultural and industry needs (MICROBOL, 2022:4). Unlike traditional qualifications, microcredentials can be earned swiftly due to their short time frame and focused knowledge and skills, allowing individuals to equip themselves to respond to immediate labour market needs and to potentially enhance their employability. While microcredentials must be stand-alone credentials, these small units of learning may be stackable towards a larger qualification, or to a standalone larger credential (OECD, 2023:3).

The rise of microcredentials has been magnified by the increasing demand for access to focused, shorter lifelong learning opportunities, that respond quickly to the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling, particularly in the context of technological advancements and the global shift towards digital economies (QAA, 2022:6). Microcredentials offer a valuable opportunity for education institutions to collaborate with industry partners, ensuring that their content is relevant and responsive to workplace needs, and where applicable is aligned with current professional standards. As educational paradigms shift, microcredentials are becoming an essential component of modern education systems, supporting diverse learning pathways and promoting inclusivity by widening access to education and training.

2. The PoMiSA Project and Work Package 3

The *Potential of Microcredentials in Southern Africa* (PoMiSA) Project is a collaborative initiative between Southern African and European higher education institutions, organisations and regulatory councils exploring the role of microcredentials in shaping education and workforce development in Southern Africa (Manyukwe, 2025). The project aims to contribute to the advancement of education and workforce development in Southern Africa by unlocking the potential of microcredentials. Through collaborative efforts and strategic initiatives, the project seeks to “establish a robust framework for the recognition, quality assurance, and regulation of micro-credentials, ultimately fostering innovation, mobility and economic growth in the region” (PoMiSA website <https://pomisa.hec.mu/>, 2024). The project is systematically developing principles and policies for the introduction, recognition and quality assurance of microcredentials in Southern African countries.

The global take-up of microcredentials has been uneven, and while Southern African policymakers, including regional and national qualifications and quality assurance councils, recognise their potential to promote access, skills development and learner and worker mobility and progression, they are concerned about issues of articulation, alignment, quality, equity and social justice. Therefore, PoMiSA project aims to strengthen relationships between education and industry while enhancing education network and governance capacities.

After examining the state of microcredential conceptualisation, policy development and implementation in Southern Africa, in both the public and private sectors is expected to commence. Through intra- and inter-regional consultations, the project will develop national concept papers for the systematic introduction of regional guidelines and policy frameworks on microcredentials. The ultimate aim of the project is to benefit the people and countries of the Southern African region, not only learners, employers and education institutions, but also entities and systems, by developing clear regulatory frameworks on, and a well-defined roadmap for microcredentials.

The PoMiSA Project is implemented through five work packages. Work Package 3, led by the Council on Higher Education South Africa (CHE-SA), involved the organisation of a consultative forum that sought to determine the state of regional microcredential policies and strategies, specifically, in Southern Africa, the African Union (AU), and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

A research-informed approach was taken to the organisation of the inter-regional consultative forum. The research design was qualitative and exploratory, and the overarching research question for the study was: What is the state of play with regards to regional conceptualisations of policies, frameworks, strategies, guidelines, activities and future trajectories in relation to microcredentials?

This Summary Note describes the research processes leading up to the inter-regional consultative forum, the themes that emerged from those processes, and how these were drawn on to inform the engagement during the forum. The Summary Note then describes the engagements that occurred during the forum, and key insights arising from it. The Summary Note concludes with a set of proposals for the development of a regional microcredentials framework and a roadmap for implementation.

3. Themes emerging from a desktop review of regional microcredentials policies, frameworks, guidelines, strategies and activities

The initial phase of the research the identification of regions and regional bodies that had policies, frameworks, guidelines, strategies, and initiatives on microcredentials, with particular attention paid to the European Union (EU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the African Union (AU), and Southern Africa. This literature on the regional state of play was obtained through desktop research, and any relevant policy documents on microcredentials from the regional bodies' websites were listed in a register. This register also included the names and contact details of any key roleplayers found from the regional bodies who were involved in the development and implementation of microcredentials policies, frameworks, strategies, guidelines, activities and future trajectories in their respective regions.

The data from the literature were analysed through a thematic analysis. Key words and sentences (codes) were selected and grouped into emerging themes and sub-themes. Six key themes were derived from the thematic analysis:

- 1) Definitions and characteristics of microcredentials;
- 2) Principles that inform the development and implementation of microcredentials;
- 3) Motivation for and benefits of microcredentials;
- 4) Limitations and challenges surrounding microcredentials;
- 5) Quality assurance of microcredentials;
- 6) Recognition, registration and portability of microcredentials.

These findings were presented in a PoMiSA project working paper: *Working Paper 1 on Regional Policies, Strategies and Frameworks for Microcredentials*.

Regarding the first theme, while there is no universally accepted definition of microcredentials, they are consistently described as short, targeted learning units with specific outcomes, typically delivered and recorded digitally, and increasingly aligned with industry needs for upskilling and reskilling. The second theme on the principles that inform the development and implementation of microcredentials, highlighted important principles for the design and implementation of microcredentials, such as learner-centeredness, relevance, transparency, and recognition, with an emphasis on access, inclusion, and respect for institutional autonomy. The motivation for adopting microcredentials

(theme 3) is driven by their flexibility, responsiveness to labour market demands, and potential to widen access to lifelong learning, particularly in the wake of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and global shifts such as digitisation. The limitations and challenges surrounding microcredentials (fourth theme) highlighted that despite their benefits, microcredentials face notable challenges such as definitional ambiguity, questions around stackability, quality assurance limitations, and the risk of exacerbating inequalities due to the digital divide. The fifth theme on the quality assurance of microcredentials, is a pivotal concern, with regional bodies advocating for tailored approaches that ensure integrity, trust and learner protection without overburdening providers, especially given the unique risks associated with short-form credentials. The sixth theme on the recognition, registration, and portability of microcredentials, hinge on transparent standards, reliable digital infrastructure (such as the EU's Europass platform), and alignment with national and international qualification systems, allowing for the mobility of learners and validation of skills across borders. Together, these themes highlighted the growing importance of microcredentials in advancing equitable, flexible and responsive education and training systems.

4. Themes emerging from interviews with key informants on regional microcredentials policies, frameworks, guidelines, strategies and activities

The findings from the desktop research guided the formulation of interview questions that were developed for in-depth interviews conducted with key figures from each regional body selected for participating in the study. A total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with key experts who have played or are playing significant roles in relation to microcredentials in their respective regions or spheres of influence. Participants included experts from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Commonwealth of Learning (COL), African Union, Southern Africa, Pacific region, UNESCO and New Zealand. The data from the interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis, and the findings were reported in *Working Paper 2: on Regional Policies and Strategies on Microcredentials: An Interview Analysis*.

One of the key findings included the ongoing confusion and lack of consensus regarding the definition of microcredentials, which was a similar finding from the desktop research on regional policies, strategies and guidelines. Based on the responses, the definition of microcredentials differs across the regions. Some respondents emphasised that microcredentials should be viewed as credentials that offer a recognised certification for competencies, while others referred to them as the actual learning processes such as short courses, or small units of learning, and some viewed them as a combination of the course (which may or may not be online) and the credential (which all agreed should be digital).

The findings from the interviews also revealed the stark differences in the adoption and implementation of microcredentials across regions. The EU seems to be the leading region in terms of established policies, frameworks and strategies, and has developed a cohesive strategy tied to lifelong learning and mobility within the EHEA. In Oceania, New Zealand has also made significant strides through the inclusion of microcredentials in its National Qualifications Framework (NQF), providing a robust model of integration, ensuring alignment with industry and educational standards. Other regions such as those in Africa and Southern Africa, the Caribbean region, and the Pacific were still in the exploratory stages. While the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) and the Caribbean region had made some progress in initiating policy dialogues, they still lacked comprehensive regional frameworks, policies and strategies.

The quality assurance of microcredentials also emerged as a theme in the findings, reflecting its critical role in establishing the credibility and legitimacy of microcredentials. Respondents from regions with established frameworks, such as New Zealand and the EU, emphasised the integration

of microcredentials into existing quality assurance systems. This approach ensures that microcredentials are held to the same standards as traditional qualifications, enhancing trust among learners, employers and institutions. However, in regions where frameworks are still developing, the lack of standardisation poses risks of proliferation and inconsistency. As observed in the Pacific, the absence of clear policies could lead to a flood of low-quality credentials, which undermine their potential value.

The recognition and portability of microcredentials remain significant challenges globally, particularly in regions with fragmented policies. Countries like Canada have provincial-level systems, creating barriers to interprovincial recognition of microcredentials. The EU has made strides towards developing a platform called *Europass* for the recognition and portability of microcredentials. New Zealand is enabling microcredentials recognition through a country list of approved microcredentials which can be easily accessed online.

Regionally, the employer recognition of microcredentials also varies widely. In regions with strong university-industry collaborations, such as the EU, microcredentials are increasingly valued. However, in less integrated contexts, employers may struggle to trust or understand these credentials. Standardised platforms, such as the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)'s list of approved microcredentials, serve as promising examples of how to enhance transparency and trust. Public awareness of microcredentials across the various regions was generally low. The respondents indicated that not much has been done to promote the public awareness of microcredentials, and only those who work within the sector know of them.

5. Learnings from the research on the role of regional frameworks, policies and strategies in the recognition and promotion of microcredentials

Regional frameworks, policies, and strategies to recognize and promote microcredentials provide the core conditions (structural, legal and quality assurance) that allow microcredentials to be trusted, transferable and scalable in countries and across regions and institutions. The desktop research and in-depth interviews revealed various roles of regional frameworks, policies and strategies in the recognition and promotion of microcredentials.

a. Establishing Common Definitions and Standards

One of the key challenges in the microcredentials space is the lack of a universally accepted definition, which limits the understanding and adoption of microcredentials (Council of the EU, 2022). This was also revealed in the report on the desktop research, and in the different definitions provided by the interview respondents.

Working Paper 1 on Regional Policies, Strategies and Frameworks for Microcredentials revealed that a lack of an agreed-upon definition can make microcredentials seem confusing and baffling to navigate (Commonwealth of Learning, 2019:2). For instance, there is no consensus on what the term “microcredentials” includes. UNESCO’s policy paper on short courses, microcredentials, and flexible pathways (2023), states that there is ambiguity regarding microcredentials, as the term is often used to mean both a qualification and short course (UNESCO, 2023:15). A microcredential can be defined as a “record of the learning outcomes [emphasis added]” that a learner acquires after completing a small volume of learning (Council of the EU, 2022; Nuffic, 2022:4). Microcredentials are also considered as “short, verified courses [emphasis added]” (based on part of the definition from the Commonwealth of Learning (2019:2). It can then be determined that a record of a learning outcome is not the same as the short course that leads up to it. The EHEA utilises the term “microcredentials” to refer to both the learning path and the qualification (EHEA, 2024:5).

Working Paper 2: on Regional Policies and Strategies on Microcredentials: An Interview Analysis highlighted the terminology and varying definitions of microcredentials across regions and institutions. This poses challenges in creating a unified understanding of what a microcredential entails. Divergence in definitions seem to be around whether the emphasis is on the certification or the learning process itself. The report revealed that several respondents placed more weight on the certification as the key component, describing it as the tangible evidence of the learning outcome. For example, microcredentials were described as a “record of the learning outcomes that the learner has acquired following a small volume of learning, so the accent is more on the record, or on the

credential itself” (ENQA respondent). Other regional bodies such as UNESCO, COL, British Columbia and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Mauritius adopted the UNESCO definition of a microcredential which defines it as being “a record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do”, which also places emphasis on the certification (definition only partially quoted for emphasis).

On the other hand, some definitions from respondents give equal importance to the actual learning process. For example, a respondent from the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) defined microcredentials as “short term courses which allow the learner to be credentialed to receive certification for work put in around a particular content or skills area...”. Another participant echoed this emphasis on the learning process by stating that, “[the New Zealand Education and Training Act of 2020] kind of defines microcredentials as any study or educational training that leads to the award of a microcredential. What we understand it to be, and what we kind of operationally are defining as a microcredential are more along the lines of ‘it is a small course of learning’.” Another response by a respondent from the Southern African region supports the earlier sentiment: “My understanding of a microcredential is that they are short courses that are creditable and can be consolidated into a qualification.” This seemingly dual emphasis on the learning activity and the certification underscores the versatility of microcredentials but also reveals the ongoing debate about their core identity.

It is not expected that every country or region will adopt the same definition of microcredentials especially because contexts vary. However, regional frameworks can help to develop a common understanding of terminology and expectations around what constitutes a microcredential by defining minimum criteria such as the volume of learning, assessment, learning outcomes, quality assurance measures and provider legitimacy. A common regional framework may also enable clarity across borders and sectors and reduce fragmentation.

b. Promoting Cross-Border Recognition and Portability

Regional policies facilitate the mobility of learners and workers by enabling mutual recognition of microcredentials across countries/regions. This is crucial in regions with high labour mobility or regional integration goals (e.g. the European Union). National frameworks aligned to regional qualifications frameworks may in future make it easier for microcredentials earned in one country to be understood and accepted in another.

The recognition of microcredentials involves the issuing organisation, the learner, and the recognising organisation (such as an employer or educational institution), necessitating transparency to build the trust required for this process (ETF, 2022:17). Establishing a register of trustworthy providers could enhance the acceptance and recognition of microcredentials

(MICROBOL, 2022:7). Digitalisation plays a crucial role in supporting recognition by enabling the portability, transparency, and reliability of information, as well as the verification of authenticity (MICROBOL, 2022:8). For microcredentials to be recognised, they must be based on clear proof of the learning outcomes achieved by the learner, and assessed by nationally recognised higher education institutions or other accredited assessment providers within the national quality assurance framework (MICROBOL, 2022:10). The EU Council recommendation on microcredentials outlines essential standard elements for the transparency of the certification, which includes: identifying the learner, the title [of the microcredential], the issuing body, the date of issue, learning outcomes, notional workload, level, the type of assessment, form of participation, and quality assurance type (Council of the EU, 2022). Recognition by relevant national authorities is highlighted as a critical feature for ensuring that credentials are of high quality (ACQF-II, 2024). In the European context the Project MICROBOL (Microcredentials Linked to the Bologna Key Commitments) framework states that, in terms of recognition, microcredentials can be offered by higher education institutions or recognised by them in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention or recognition of prior learning (RPL) (MICROBOL 2020, 7, cited in Vita Global, n.d.:26). Although the research mentioned above highlights mainly the higher education sector, microcredentials are offered and achieved in other education sectors as well. The regional framework proposed here is also intended for all education sectors.

c. Enabling Quality Assurance and Trust of Microcredentials

Without quality assurance, microcredentials risk being seen as unreliable or inconsistent. Regional policies, strategies and frameworks often include guidelines for accrediting providers, verifying learning outcomes, and ensuring assessment integrity. This shared quality infrastructure fosters trust among employers, learners, and education systems.

The approaches to quality assurance may differ by country. *Working Paper 1* revealed that in the European context, the primary responsibility for the internal quality assurance of microcredentials lies with the education institutions and their internal processes, while external quality assurance conducted by quality assurance agencies should be focused on the institutional approach to microcredentials (Vita Global, n.d.:9; ETF, 2022:13; Council of the EU, 2022; MICROBOL, 2022:7; EHEA, 2024:27). These agencies should support education institutions in developing policies and their processes for quality assurance, while also assuring the public and stakeholders of the effectiveness of microcredentials (MICROBOL, 2022:7). The European Training Foundation (ETF) suggests that a comprehensive external quality assurance approach combines “self-assessment, external review and processes for improvement” (ETF, 2022:13). The self-assessment (such as participation feedback from learners), external review, and processes for improvement are means of monitoring and evaluating microcredentials (OECD, 2024:13). The EU context focuses on higher education but as mentioned earlier, microcredentials can exist outside of the higher education space.

While there are yet no regional policies, frameworks or strategies on microcredentials in the African context, the *ACQF-II Microcredentials Survey Report* unpacked the various approaches of quality assurance procedures applied to microcredentials in some African countries. Kenya's quality assurance of formal and summative assessments incorporates internal and external assessors (ACQF-II, 2024); while in Zambia, a microcredential has to be planned by a team and approved at the department, school, or senate level (ACQF-II, 2024).

Regional policies, frameworks, and strategies also highlight the possible challenges that arise in relation to quality assurance of microcredentials, which can assist regions in understanding how to tackle certain issues. While the literature emphasises the importance and need for quality assurance, implementing it is not straightforward (UNESCO, 2022:12). The discourse surrounding quality is triggered by the recognition and portability of microcredentials and the hurdles that employers have experienced regarding the variability and apparent lack of transparency of microcredentials (Vita Global, n.d.:28). The European Training Foundation suggests a risk-based approach to quality assurance of microcredentials should be undertaken, as it recognises that “the stakes and potential consequences of participating in a smaller, more focused learning experience are different from those associated with a full 3-year university program” (2022:14). As such, the quality assurance methods for microcredentials should be tailored to accommodate the unique risks and characteristics associated with these smaller credentials (ETF, 2022:14).

d. Encouraging Innovation and Digital Integration

Microcredentials often rely on digital credentials, online platforms, and data systems. Regional policies, frameworks, and strategies can guide the development of interoperable digital infrastructures, such as learning wallets or skills passports, ensuring that microcredentials can be stored, shared, and verified seamlessly across countries and sectors. The digitalisation of credentials significantly enhances their portability, allowing them to be issued, stored, and shared in various digital formats, including blockchain technology, ensuring authenticity through online databases or direct verification with the awarding institution (EHEA, 2024:35).

An example of such a framework is the *European Union's Council Recommendation on a European approach to Microcredentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability* (2022). Portability, a key element in the EU's definition of microcredentials, ensures that learners can store their credentials on preferred platforms and share them with selected parties who can understand and verify their authenticity (Council of the EU, 2022). Digital tools support education institutions in managing and issuing microcredentials, aligning with European and international standards for privacy and data protection to ensure interoperability and trusted credential sharing (EHEA, 2024:35). The regional framework clearly states that microcredentials are owned by the learners, are portable and can be combined into larger credentials, facilitating a seamless exchange of data and ensuring authenticity

through secure digital wallets such as *Europass*, which adhere to open standards and data models and are in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (Council of the EU, 2022).

e. Driving Policy Alignment and Institutional Implementation

Regional policies, frameworks and strategies guide national governments in integrating microcredentials into their education, labour and digital transformation agendas. By aligning efforts, they reduce duplication and promote coherence across sectors, from higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sectors, to professional bodies and employer groups. These strategies also help institutions design and offer microcredentials that meet shared regional priorities, such as green skills, digital literacy, or entrepreneurship.

While many of the regional policies, strategies and frameworks do not speak on public awareness *per se*, they can play a vital role in boosting public awareness and understanding of microcredentials. In *Working Paper 2*, the respondents highlighted that one of the key barriers to the uptake of microcredentials is the general lack of familiarity among learners, employers, and even education providers. Regional policies, frameworks and strategies which support the development of public registries (such as the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF)) and digital platforms (such as *European Union's Council Recommendation on a European approach to Microcredentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability*) can serve to promote microcredentials and contribute to the visibility and legitimacy of microcredentials. If there are regional campaigns, peer learning activities, public activations and dialogues/symposia on microcredentials taking place, the policies and frameworks on microcredentials recognition enable the promotion of microcredentials will be tangible documents supporting the development and implementation of microcredentials, which can promote awareness and build public trust.

6. The interregional consultative forum: methodology, speakers and outcomes

The interregional consultative forum sought to deepen the understanding of regional strategies, policies and frameworks for the development and implementation of microcredentials. It provided a platform to explore key challenges, opportunities, and best practices in various regions. Furthermore, the forum aimed to gather critical reflections, global insights, and regional perspectives to guide a harmonised and inclusive approach to microcredentials in Southern Africa.

The report on the desktop research and interviews resulted in two working papers which formed the basis of the conversations of the interregional consultative forum. The panelists that presented and participated in a panel discussion at the forum were Ms Coleen Jaftha from the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) who spoke from the perspective of developments in the SADC, Dr Jako Olivier from COL, Ms Isabelle Ladron-Arroyo and Mr Koen Nomden from the European Commission, Mr Nicholas Patrici from OBREAL Global and Dr Borhene Chakroun from UNESCO. The forum proceedings included presentations on regional perspectives of microcredentials by the panelists and a discussion session which was facilitated by Dr James Keevy from JET Education Services (Forum video:

<https://youtu.be/p51O9xMNMvs?si=piv8GofEgX5KKHlr>).

Ms Coleen Jaftha from the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) presented a SADC perspective on microcredentials, noting that microcredentials are not a novel concept in the SADC region. However, they have been operational in various forms for years, albeit under different names and without a coherent policy structure. She highlighted the need to develop a shared understanding of the purpose, scope and legitimacy of microcredentials in the region. Importantly, she pointed out the lack of standard definitions and confusion caused by overlapping concepts such as part qualifications, unit standards, single subjects and training courses. She argued that microcredentials can fall within the NQF space, or partially in the NQF space, or outside of the NQF space. Ms Jaftha called for clarity on fundamental questions: Are all short trainings microcredentials? Should their recognition depend on intended use for work or study? Who regulates their validity? She emphasised that a SADC definition must be contextual, inclusive, and built on meaningful stakeholder engagement.

Representing the European Commission, Ms Isabel Ladron-Arroyo and Mr Koen Nomden provided a comparative perspective on EU initiatives. They discussed the Council Recommendation on microcredentials, which promotes a common definition, quality assurance standards and transparency. According to them, microcredentials are central to achieving the EU's goals around

lifelong learning, digital inclusion and labour market agility. The European approach defines microcredentials as small-volume, flexible learning units that are quality assured and portable. The EU envisions these credentials as tools to support workforce upskilling, personal development and greater mobility. Microcredentials are expected to include key components such as clear learning outcomes, trusted providers, and compatibility with national qualification frameworks.

The presentation by Mr Nicholas Patrici of OBREAL Global highlighted the HAQAA (Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation) initiative as a strategic framework for advancing the harmonisation of quality assurance in higher education across Africa, with potential relevance for shaping discussions around microcredentials. While HAQAA does not explicitly address microcredentials, its efforts in promoting continental policy dialogue and technical cooperation, particularly in quality assurance, data collection and credit transfer, provide a solid foundation for future engagement with the microcredentials agenda. Mr Patrici emphasised that microcredentials, although not new in concept, require greater structural coherence and alignment with broader processes such as modularisation and skills recognition.

HAQAA's technical contributions include supporting the adaptation of African standards and guidelines for quality assurance, addressing fragmented data systems and reformulating credit transfer mechanisms through the African Credit Transfer System. These efforts aim to foster regional recognition, mobility and trust in learning outcomes across institutions. Furthermore, the initiative is engaging with sub-regional bodies and working to promote inclusive education policies that link higher education reform to economic development and youth employability.

Dr Jako Olivier from COL discussed the importance of connecting microcredentials with digital identity wallets and referenced existing national initiatives in Canada and Malta as examples of integrated digital ecosystems. He also touched on the need for buy-in and discussed the approach to building a Commonwealth Credit Transfer Framework for Micro-credentials. This would support the recognition and mobility across institutions and borders. He further recommended drawing from existing practices, avoiding reinvention, and fostering multi-sector collaboration, especially involving industry partners.

Dr Borhene Chakroun of UNESCO provided a global overview of microcredentials, highlighting the proliferation of credentials worldwide and the urgent need to move from a "jungle of credentials" to integrated systems of recognition. He explained that UNESCO has convened global experts to propose a regionally neutral working definition of microcredentials, aimed at triggering further policy dialogue. Dr Chakroun stressed the importance of recognising diverse learning pathways, including informal and non-formal methods, and noted the potential of microcredentials to validate learning

beyond traditional academic structures. He also discussed the tension between promoting flexible, learner-centred systems and maintaining rigorous quality assurance. Importantly, he called attention to the need for interoperability of systems, cross-border recognition and inclusive design. He also pointed out that recognition practices must be transparent, inclusive, and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on inclusive education and SDG 8 on decent work.

Facilitated by Dr James Keevy of JET Education Services, the panel discussion expanded on key issues raised by the speakers. Panelists and participants agreed that microcredentials must be contextualised according to their purpose, whether for employability, professional development or social inclusion. Concerns were raised regarding the digital nature of many microcredentials and the risks of excluding underserved populations. Calls were made to develop low-tech solutions and learner-friendly infrastructures that bridge digital gaps. Several participants highlighted the need for microcredentials to empower marginalised learners. A recurring theme was the validation of skills acquired outside the classroom, whether through work, migration or lived experiences. There was also strong advocacy for focusing on learning outcomes. Concerns were also expressed about the conceptual clarity of microcredentials. It was recommended that a single term be adopted where possible, but allowances be made for regional diversity. Governance protocols on microcredentials must clearly articulate who certifies, who recognises and under what conditions.

7. Proposals for the content to be included in a *Regional Framework on Microcredentials for Southern Africa*

The following section draws from the research and the inter-regional consultation to propose some content for consideration for the development of the *Regional Framework on Microcredentials for Southern Africa*. The proposed content will need to be extensively consulted in the PoMiSA Project, and requires broader consultation with relevant collectives, structures and organisations in the region.

a. PREAMBLE

The rapid advancement of digital technologies, automation and regional and global crises (including pandemics, conflict, poverty and unemployment) has highlighted the need for further efforts to create labour market agility to enhance upskilling and reskilling with the goal to align knowledge, skills, values and competencies with job immediate requirements and to promote lifelong and lifewide learning.

Microcredentials, whether viewed as a new phenomenon, or as a continuation of other forms of informal or non-formal education and training that were achieved and recognised in various ways before, are acknowledged pathways to achieve some of this alignment. To achieve this goal regionally, this alignment needs to extend beyond national boundaries into the broader region of Southern Africa, hence the need for a *Regional Framework on Microcredentials for Southern Africa*.

b. PURPOSE

The purpose of this regional framework is to provide guidance to national agencies, educational providers, industry and other relevant stakeholders in the Southern African region. This guidance includes:

- Processes for the development, provision, quality assurance, certification, recognition, registration, portability and stackability of microcredentials, and
- The development of country frameworks, in this way ensuring a degree of alignment between country frameworks and other frameworks in Southern Africa.

The envisaged result is an integrated system of provision and recognition of microcredentials within the region that will be based on trust and will enable portability of learning.

The regional framework seeks to contextualise regional microcredentials and their related activities in a way that will harness digital affordances where appropriate, but being mindful of the digital divide that still exists in the region.

To encourage mutual compatibility with other national frameworks in SADC, three searchable microcredentials registers are proposed:

1. Registers of recognised providers of microcredentials
2. Registers of recognised microcredentials
3. Registers of learner achievements.

c. DEFINITION OF MICROCREDENTIALS

Definitions of microcredentials vary globally, but for the purposes of this regional framework, “a microcredential is the digital certification of quality assured assessment by a recognised provider that the owner of the microcredential has the relevant knowledge, skills, values and competencies as described in the learning outcomes of the microcredential”.

A microcredential may be aligned and portable into the SADC Qualifications Framework and may therefore be associated with credits of between 1 and 119 (between 10 and 1190 notional hours), as well as with SADC QF Levels (between 1-10). Microcredentials may, however, also be located outside of the SADC and national qualifications frameworks. For microcredentials related to qualification frameworks, alignment to the SADCQF is preferable, but this alignment should not, in principle, hamper the recognition of microcredentials across national boundaries in Southern Africa.

Whilst the certification of the microcredential preferably should be in a digital format, the learning towards the microcredential and / or the assessment of the validation of the skills and competencies does not have to be in an online digital format and may also be beyond traditional educational structures.

d. REGISTER OF RECOGNISED PROVIDERS

Each participating country in the region will develop a national register of recognised providers of microcredentials based on policies and procedures of the national quality assurance agency(ies) and/or qualifications authority. This will support participating countries to mutually recognise each other’s register of recognised microcredential providers to enable portability. The searchable register should have the following minimum elements in place: the name of the provider, the website and contact details of the provider, the legal status of the provider (e.g. public university, private institution with a register and or company number, industry provider with a company number), an accessible list of the microcredentials of the provider, as well details of the national quality assurance agency(ies) and/or qualifications authority that recognised the provider.

e. REGISTER OF RECOGNISED MICROCREDENTIALS

Each participating country in the region will develop its own searchable national register of recognised microcredentials as aligned to the policies and procedures of the national quality assurance agency (ies) and/or qualifications authority, and linked to the national register of recognised providers. Participating countries are encouraged to mutually recognise each other's register of recognised microcredentials to enable portability.

The searchable register should have the following elements in place: the title of the microcredential; the provider and its recognition status; whether the microcredential is linked to the national qualifications framework or stand-alone; if it is linked to the national qualifications framework, the number of credits, notional hours and level of the microcredential, with relevant articulation possibilities; if it is not linked to the national qualifications framework, the duration of the microcredential; beginning and end dates for the microcredential; requisite pre-knowledge; the mode of provision, and requirements such as access to a device and the internet, and / or accommodation and transport; the learning outcomes; assessment strategies; additional keywords and links to industry-related opportunities, where relevant; cost and / or funding opportunities.

A distinction should be made between

- microcredentials that are accredited by national quality assurance bodies, perhaps referred to as 'accredited national microcredentials'
- microcredentials that have been approved internally by an approved provider, perhaps referred to as 'approved institutional microcredentials', and
- microcredentials that are endorsed by a professional body, employer or industry.

f. REGISTER OF LEARNER ACHIEVEMENTS

Each participating country in the region will develop its own national register of learner achievements aligned with the policies and procedures of the national quality assurance agency(ies) and/or qualifications authority, and linked to the register of recognised microcredentials and recognised providers. Participating countries are encouraged to mutually recognise each other's register of recognised microcredentials and learner achievements to enable portability. Data security and national privacy laws should be adhered to in all the national registers.

The register which should be searchable and shareable should have the following minimum elements in place: learner name and identification; the title of the microcredential (linked to the register of recognised microcredentials); country(ies)/region(s) of the issuer; the issuing body (linked to the register of recognised providers); the date of achievement; the time span of validity of the achievement (where required/applicable); the learning outcomes achieved (linked to the register of

recognised microcredentials); the notional hours and level, if linked to a national qualifications framework (linked to the register of recognised microcredentials); level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the microcredential; the assessment methodology and format (linked to the register of recognised microcredentials); form of participation in the learning activity; as well as the form of the quality assurance (linked to the register of recognised providers and the register of recognised microcredentials).

g. DEVELOPMENT OF MICROCREDENTIALS

Microcredentials are developed by recognised providers. Providers of microcredentials include but are not limited to traditional educational institutions, employers and industry bodies or regulating councils and professional bodies. Microcredentials that are meant to enhance access to work opportunities should be developed in collaboration with the relevant industry role-players. The development of microcredentials is based on the quality assurance policies and procedures of the national quality assurance agency(ies) and/or qualifications authority. Providers are encouraged to continue to invest in and to provide low-tech solutions which require minimal digital infrastructure and data for the learning and validation that lead to microcredentials.

Microcredentials that are linked to national qualifications frameworks, and therefore to the SADC QF, should be developed with the requisite notional hours and exit level outcomes to enable recognition.

h. PRINCIPLES

The development and provision of microcredentials should be informed by an appropriate set of principles. Principles that could be considered are responsiveness, purposefulness, collaboration, social justice/inclusivity, universal design and others.

i. QUALITY ASSURANCE OF MICROCREDENTIALS

Microcredentials should be quality assured. The quality assurance of microcredentials and the validity of the assessment of achievement must be in line with the policies and procedures developed by the national quality assurance agency(ies). Quality assurance should take place through external quality assurance mechanisms and/or through internal quality assurance mechanisms. However, the quality assurance of microcredentials should take into account the nature of microcredentials, and especially the need for agility. In this regard, traditional educational institutions who have a track record of functional internal quality assurance, and may be recognised as providers thereby limiting the need for additional processes.

j. STACKABILITY

Microcredentials should be capable of being recognised as stand-alone learning units. However, where this is appropriate, microcredentials should be able to stack towards a larger credential and/or towards a qualification, through mechanisms such as credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

k. PUBLIC AWARENESS

National agencies should inform the public about and raise awareness of microcredentials. It is especially important to harness key players in industry and communities and to develop public-private partnerships to harness the full potential of microcredentials.

Public awareness could focus on showcasing the benefits of microcredentials for learners (upskilling, employability), for employers (identifying skilled talent), and educational providers (diversifying offerings). Specific industry engagement strategies, such as regional industry forums, partnership programs for co-developing microcredentials, and sector-specific awareness sessions, can further enhance understanding and adoption among employers.

l. FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

Each participating country remains responsible for the funding and implementation of microcredentials in their country.

Regional bodies such as SADC and SAQAN (Southern African Quality Assurance Network), as well as individual institutions, are encouraged to harness funding opportunities to enable regional cooperation for the development of cross-national microcredentials, as well as for the development of the national registers which should be mutually aligned with each other.

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