Micro-credentials: Towards a Universal Definition

Groningen Declaration Network Position Statement on Micro-credentials

This position statement is respectfully submitted for consideration by the European Commission.

The Groningen Declaration Network is a global community of organizations and individuals that want to make digital learner data portability happen. It is an international, non-profit, and voluntary network that supports academic and professional digital credential mobility so that citizens worldwide are able to consult and share their authentic educational data autonomously, with the expectation of fair recognition. It does this by bringing together stakeholders from across the global Digital Student Data Ecosystem.

Groningen Declaration Network
Who We Are

The Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) is pleased to provide a position paper on the European Commission's broad-based consultative work to establish a definition for micro-credentials. The GDN represents a broad and diverse international community of public, private, and government entities and individuals who are committed to promoting trusted digital transfer of student data as an enabling force to advance social and global mobility.[1] We believe that citizens worldwide should be able to consult and share their authentic educational credentials and data with whomever they want, whenever they want, wherever they want. The GDN strongly believes lifelong learning and establishing a trusted, coherent, and comprehensive credential comparability ecosystem.

The core reason the GDN is interested in micro-credentials is that we believe that achieving full access to learning opportunities requires meeting learners in their spaces and places. By its very nature, the focused, customized learning certified through micro-credentials represents a transformative way to usher in learner autonomy, agency, and self-sovereignty. Our goals and principles fit seamlessly with the micro-credential trajectory, which has the potential of being an important equalizer in learner mobility. We applaud the creation of a definition that covers the full spectrum of lifelong learning and that is compatible with the range of educational systems and structures found throughout the globe.

The GDN's Five Definitional Dimensions for Micro-Credentials

Learner Autonomy
The Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) views micro-credentials as offering transformative potential for providing access to global mobility due to their accessible nature. Privacy contexts and adoption will necessitate learner's maintaining ownership, agency, and control over who has access to their data and documents.

Trust
The GDN believes that quality assured micro-credentials advance credential certainty, transparency, and authenticity. Growing fraud requires credential definitions for micro-credentials and supporting infrastructure that adopt cyber security principles, including confidentiality, integrity, and availability.

A Focus on Learning Outcomes
Micro-credentials directly focus on showcasing achievements of what a learner knows and can do through skills and competency attainment around specific subjects.

Interoperability
The GDN is committed to supporting standards-based connectivity. Micro-credentials need to be supported with flexible, innovative, and interoperable systems, standards, protocols, and practices to enable easy sharing of data.

Portability
Micro-credentials provide accessible, coherent, recognized, and focused learning opportunities that stand alone or complement other forms of learning, advancing access to work and education. Ease of sharing is essential to their adoption.

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[1] Further information on the GDN is available in the Background Note appended to this position statement and online at https://www.groningendeclaration.org/

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Micro-credentials are at the inflection point where the critical elements that enable lifelong learning, credential access, and mobility come together in their most acute form. The Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) supports both establishing a comprehensive definition and advancing the broader acceptance of micro-credentials within the educational ecosystem. For microcredentials to become widely accepted, there needs to be a mechanism, enabled by some agreed standard(s) or protocol(s), to validate the credential recipient's identity and credential to ensure quality assurance and enable and promote recognition. Once microcredentials have attained the maturity to provide such granularity, digital credentials in general will have made a significant step towards enabling lifelong learning.

The GDN applauds the European Commission's goal of establishing a clear and concise definition that will serve learners around the world by promoting a cohesive, consistent, and comprehensive understanding of the role micro-credentials play in Europe. Towards that goal, the GDN emphasizes five dimensions in the description: learner autonomy, trust, a focus on learning outcomes, interoperability, and portability.

The GDN looks forward to offering ongoing support to assist the European Commission in shaping the definition and in turning micro-credentials into readily available, accepted, and recognized day-to-day artifacts.

GDN Position Statement

With consideration for the mandate of the GDN, we believe the European Commission's micro-credentialing definition should emphasize the following:[2]

1. **Learner Autonomy** – Ensuring micro-credentials support rapid upskilling and reskilling and subsequently contribute to global mobility *requires the definition recognize the unique value of micro-credentials as enablers of learner autonomy, agency, and control*.

   Affordability, employer recognition, and flexibility are priorities for learners when they consider the value of micro-credentials. Developing micro-credentials that prioritize these goals will help learners to acquire new skills and knowledge in ways that advance their autonomy, agency, and control. Micro-credentials that are directly related to the job, are competency-based, accredited, industry-aligned, and standardized are valued by employers. Aligning the interests of learners and employers may contribute to the perceived and actual value of micro-credentials.

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[2] This position paper is responding to the following:
Public consultation launched on micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability | Education and Training (europa.eu)
A European approach to micro-credentials (europa.eu)

GDN suggested implementation solution: Learner Autonomy can be built by using technology that helps issuing organizations bridge today and tomorrow, that enables learner access and control of the micro-credential, and that provides strong connections to employers through innovative digital mechanisms, technologies, and platforms.

2. **Trust** – Ensuring adoption ***requires the definition emphasize that micro-credentials are trusted and based on transparently evident quality assured policies and practices***.

Micro-credentials are relatively nascent with a need to be formally accepted within the long-standing credentialing ecosystem. An emphasis on trust is required to achieve successful adoption into the mainstream, with consideration for regional diversity, authority, autonomy, and tradition. Different countries, regions, and organizations beyond the European Union will establish locally derived micro-credentialing frameworks that are trusted within their context. Transparency and quality assured policies and practices will enable trust and subsequent comparability and recognition. Acknowledging the trust dimension can be accomplished using terminology that emphasizes commitments to quality assured policies and practices, trusted sources, and trusted and secure formats and channels for data transfer (i.e., to encourage the adoption of cyber security principles to combat fraud).

Trust requires recognition of the role each actor brings to the creation, use, recognition, and adoption of a micro-credential. Using the concept of a *triangle of trust*, the learner is the owner of the credential (i.e., they are who they say they are, acknowledge the credential as theirs, and give permission to others to access and use it for assessment purposes); the issuer is the trusted entity that provides the micro-credential to the learner in a manner that is informed by quality assured policies and assessment and sharing practices (internally and externally provided); and the verifier is the consumer of the micro-credential who needs to understand, assess, and trust in the learning outcomes represented.

GDN suggested implementation solution: Trust can be built by using technology that emphasizes commitments to quality assured policies and practices, trusted sources, and secure formats and channels of data transfer that also encourage the adoption of cyber security principles to combat fraud.

3. **A Focus on Learner Outcomes** - Micro-credentials should be designed with locally determined ***purpose and with a clear focus on providing verifiable evidence of what learning outcomes have been assessed and achieved.***

Micro-credentials directly focus on showcasing achievements of what a learner knows and can do through skills and competency attainment around specific subjects. Micro-credentials are designed with focused intent and aspire to provide access to employment, further education, or both. The relevance of purpose, locally situated, must be recognized explicitly in the definition to enhance understanding of what the credential is so that a learner is fully supported when sharing their micro-credential with others.

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GDN suggested implementation solution: A focus on learning outcomes can be achieved by ensuring the micro-credential reflects what a learner can know and is able to do in an easily verifiable format with links to additional information about the credential. Digital certification represents a significant enabler for this area.

4. **Interoperability –** For successful wide adoption and access for learners, *it is essential that the definition signals the importance of using interoperable standards for data exchange while still respecting regional diversity, authority, and autonomy*.

The diversity of regional political context, technology, and participants requires that the definition embed respect for regional autonomy and authority enabled by interoperable systems and best practice standards for data sharing. The risk of not doing so for learners includes undermining their privacy, autonomy, agency, and control and subsequent portability of their micro-credentials.

The worldwide accessibility and attractiveness of micro-credential learning opportunities necessitate a global perspective on both interoperability and portability. Advocating for and supporting the development and adaptation of interoperable standards for data exchange in the context of micro-credentials will help cement the EU as a pioneer in this complex international landscape.

GDN suggested implementation solution: Interoperability can be built by using standards for connectivity that advance learner global mobility. Europe is particularly well positioned here with its work with EBSI and other related initiatives.

5. **Portability –** Enshrining learner access to and control of their micro-credential in the definition *requires a similar commitment to portability* as these two dimensions are inextricably linked to self sovereign identity principles (i.e., learner autonomy, agency, and control) and data privacy.

Ensuring access requires portable methods so that learners have their micro-credential readily accessible and available to them, 24/7. The technology solutions are many and some yet to be determined; therefore, no one technology should form part of the definition. The GDN acknowledges and values the contribution of technology platforms to the credential ecosystem that align with Verifiable Credentials, self sovereignty, and distributed identity but also believes in the importance of bridging today and tomorrow to ensure inclusive access for all actors involved.

GDN suggested implementation solution: Achieving full portability and ensuring effective acceptance and assessment by third party employers, industry, governments, and other institutions requires frameworks, registers, and catalogues to enhance understanding and transparency regarding micro-credentials.

Appendix: GDN Background Note

Created in 2012 at an historic meeting in Groningen, the Netherlands, and established legally as a foundation in 2016, the Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) brings together key stakeholders to create an ethically centered Digital Learner Data Ecosystem. With a Board of Directors representing every continent, the GDN stands as the most inclusive global effort to date aimed at enabling digital learner data mobility.

Since 2012, the GDN has held its annual meeting in cities around the globe, ranging from Beijing and Washington, D.C. to Málaga, Cape Town, Melbourne, Paris, Puebla (Mexico) and New Delhi – which had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and yet still resulted in a series of webinars in a digital response to the pandemic . The meetings have been a key catalyst to the establishment of digital learner data depositories and exchange networks in and between China, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, Africa, Canada, and numerous countries in Europe.

With the 2019 meeting in Puebla, Mexico, the GDN has begun to mobilize digital learner data efforts in Latin America. In 2020, similar efforts spread to India and southern Asia. For 2021, the aim is to mobilize digital learner data portability efforts in the African continent and establish the connection with the Francophone world. During the 2021 annual meeting, the Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC), lead host of the 2021 annual meeting, will proudly highlight its ARUCC MyCreds™ | MesCertif™ National Network (https://mycreds.ca/) as Canada's national bilingual (French / English) platform to interact with global like-minded partners.

The GDN is a diverse, global, and interconnected ecosystem which includes large digital learner data depositories, educational institutions, government bodies, third party academic data processors and innovative companies, all seeking to facilitate educational and professional mobility. At the level of regional international organizations, the GDN maintains relations and works with organizations such as:

AACRAO, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
APNNIC, the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres
ARUCC, Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada
ASEM Education, the Asia-Europe Meeting on Education
BFUG Bologna Follow Up Group
CAMES, the Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur
CoL, the Commonwealth of Learning
ENIC-NARIC Network
IAU, the International Association of Universities
NZQA - New Zealand Qualifications Authority
SHARE, the European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region
TAICEP, The Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals

UNESCO-IESALC, the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
Universities Australia
Universities New Zealand

The GDN community is committed to learner privacy and data protection, equity, transparent and responsible practices, and the recognition of digital learner data and qualifications. The GDN aims to ensure that citizens have access to secure digital records of their own educational achievements and can share them with whomever they choose, whenever they choose. The embrace of opportunities to present skills and educational attainment that respond to emerging industry and employer needs has also been a strand of the GDN activity in recent years.

For those displaced by conflict and faced with the necessity of rebuilding their lives and history, the loss of academic records presents major hurdles to relocation and pursuit of education and skills development. The GDN has thus supported initiatives dealing with migrant data mobility, resettlement and access to services otherwise denied. Such initiatives include the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR), the Article 26 Backpack Initiative, the African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN), and Kiron Open Higher Education.

The goal of the GDN is a global, equitable, accessible Digital Learner Data Portability environment. One of the largest global issues to this end is a fundamental lack and imbalance of global data and digital capacity.

The opportunity exists to convene practitioners and supporters to continuously share digitalization development and workable strategies and tactics; expand the number of new projects moving forward globally where capacity is lacking; and continue to bring new ideas forward. The GDN goal is to expand the global exchange of digital learner data, and to increase learner and professional mobility in underserved regions of the globe through regional convenings, training and the establishment of digital exchange pilot projects.

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Who we are?

The following contributors are GDN participants and/or signatories from around the world with extensive expertise in the credentialing and digital ecosystems.

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