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PoMiSA
Connecting Credentials Creating Futures

The State of Play of Microcredentials:

South Africa

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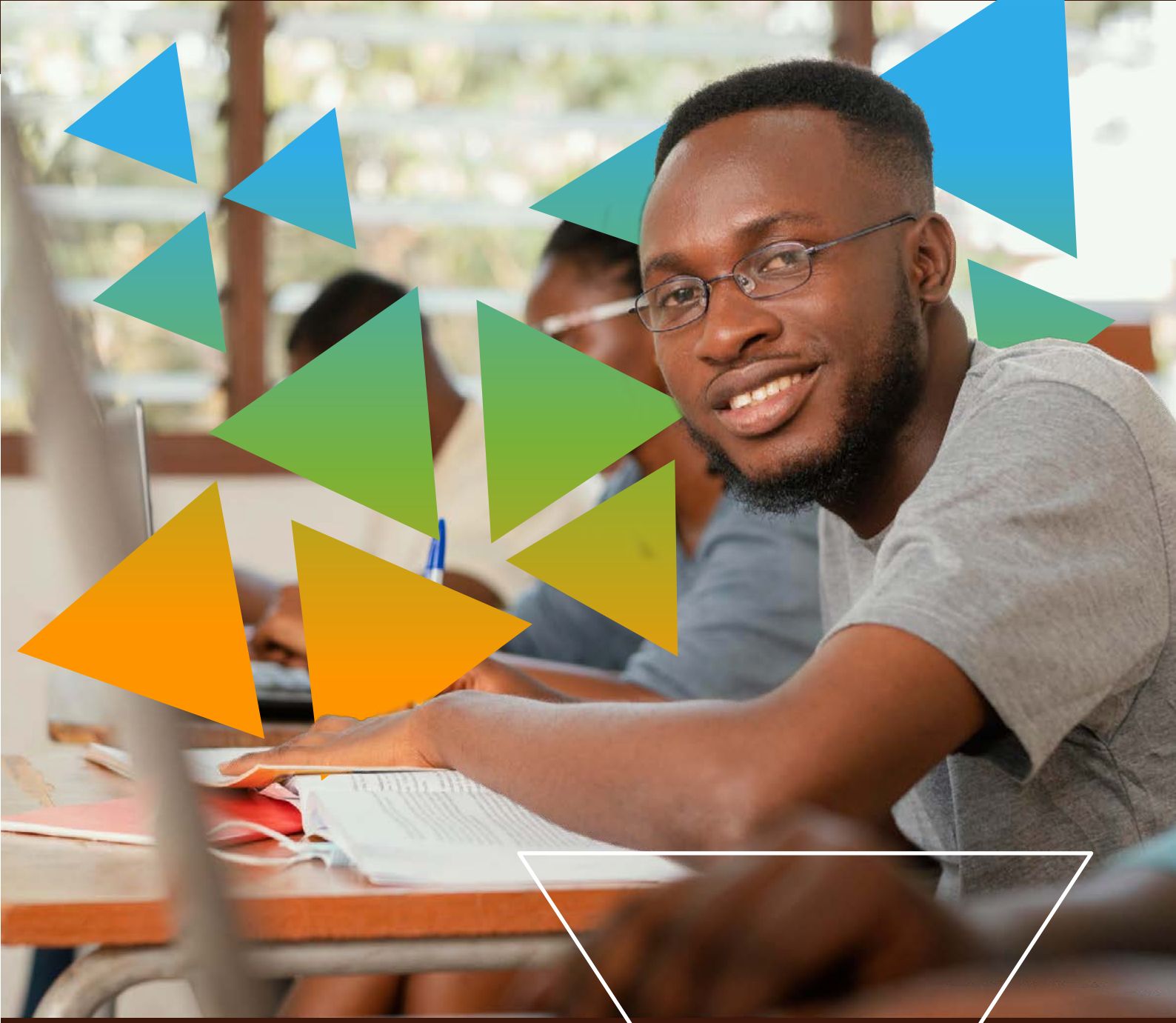
Acronyms and abbreviations

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
GDN	Groningen Declaration Network
GENFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-framework
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
NEETs	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NPMN	National Pathways Management Network
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSFAS	National Financial Aid Scheme
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFO	Organising Framework for Occupations
OIHD	Occupations in High Demand
OQSF	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
PoMiSA	Potential of Microcredentials in Southern Africa
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
QC	Quality Council
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SASCO	South African Standard Classification of Occupations
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SSPs	Sector Skills Plans
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
Umalusi	General and Further Education and Training Council
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1.1 PoMiSA purpose and scope

The Potential of Microcredentials in Southern Africa (PoMiSA) is a collaboration between Southern African and European universities and other higher education entities that are exploring the potential of microcredentials in the respective country and regional contexts. PoMiSA is in the process of systematically developing principles, policies, frameworks and guidelines for good practice with regard to the recognition, definition, provision, quality assurance and regulation of microcredentials, including in South Africa (University of Johannesburg & Partners 2023). PoMiSA focuses specifically on capacity building in higher education and training, which includes high-level technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and, critically, the interface with employers (Alasmari 2024).

PoMiSA provides the platform in South Africa for the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Council on Higher Education (CHE), Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and the post-school sector to jointly formalise agreed definitions and a position on microcredentials. This process should be done in unison with employers and other demand side actors and could lead to the establishment of a permanent infrastructure for microcredentialing (CHE 2022). The process would be in line with developments currently underway in many parts of the world, including across PoMiSA partner countries, and also in Australia (Australian Government 2021), Malaysia (Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2020) and the Seychelles (Seychelles Qualifications Authority 2024).

1.1.2 Definitions of microcredentials

The emergence of microcredentials globally (Council of the European Union 2022; OECD 2023; UNESCO 2023) has led to a strong push for common definitions and standards. Global organisations including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the European Commission, the European Training Commission, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) have played key roles in defining microcredentials and putting forward approaches and guidelines.

The UNESCO definition of a microcredential represents the outcome of a global consultation process commissioned by UNESCO in 2021 involving a global panel of 47 experts and led by Beverly Oliver (UNESCO 2022). This definition provides a useful and important reference point for the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF's attempt to take stock of the existing definitions, practices and functions of microcredentials.

> *A microcredential*
>
> - *Is a record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do.*
> - *Includes assessment based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider.*
> - *Has standalone value and may also contribute to or complement other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning.*
> - *Meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance. (UNESCO 2022: 6)*

1.1.3 Purpose of the report

This report presents the existing 'state of play' of microcredential conceptualisation, policy development and implementation in South Africa in both the public and private sectors with respect to provision of, need for, interest in and effectiveness thereof. Microcredentials are an important and growing area of interest in South Africa, just as is the case across the PoMiSA partner countries, the African continent (ACQF 2023), the Southern African region (UNICEF 2024) and also globally (Cedefop 2022). The report aims to provide

a roadmap that informs and guides South African organisations and institutions in developing a country-specific framework for the systematic inclusion of microcredentials. The report is, moreover, expected to contribute to groundwork for developing common Southern African guidelines for microcredentials and, more broadly, facilitating current and future compatibility and cooperation regionally and globally.

The report has three chapters: 1) an introduction; 2) analysis of the state of play of microcredentials in South Africa; and 3) a summary of findings and policy considerations.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study involved close analysis of the research questions. Based on their expertise, small groups of two to four team members focused on high-level questions under four themes (see table that follows). Using their own familiarity with and expert knowledge of the field and its related published and grey literature, the teams conducted desktop literature reviews to extract material related to their question. Team members shared their review findings in an online document, which allowed scrutiny and critique from other team members.

A collaborative approach was implemented for drafting the report. The drafting process involved collaborative writing using Google Docs. This enabled real-time access and ready inputs from the writing team, providing an inclusive space where members could comment, edit and offer inputs via suggestions or comments and contribute ideas directly in the document. This process facilitated transparency, joint ownership and iterative improvement of the quality of the content towards a more comprehensive final version. A PoMiSA South African Review Panel was constituted including prominent academics and practitioners in the field: Prof Kevin Durrheim from the University of the Witwatersrand; Prof Francois Strydom from the University of the Free State; Prof Thabo Msibi from the University of KwaZulu-Natal; and Ms Faith Nyaka of the National School of Government, South Africa. A focus group meeting with a select group of stakeholders was held on 18 September 2024 to critically engage with the country report and provide feedback.

This report is therefore based on evidence that originates from: the literature review; evidence generated through online searches of microcredential development in the South African post-school education and training (PSET) sector (an area that is not well-developed in the formal literature); the input that was provided by expert critical reviewers; and the reflections generated during a stakeholder verification session.

There are four themes with associated overarching research questions that frame and organise this PoMiSA country report. As explained above, these themes and questions informed data gathering and provided a coherent framework for this report.

> ***The emergence of microcredentials globally has led to a strong push for common definitions and standards.***

Table 1: Research themes and overarching research questions

Research Theme	Research Questions
Microcredential Conceptualisation	• What are the key drivers and attractors for adopting microcredentials in South Africa, and how do these align with current social, educational and workforce trends? • How are microcredentials defined and understood by various stakeholders (educational institutions, students, employers, policymakers) in South Africa, and what impact does this have on the value and challenges of microcredentials?
Public and Private Sector Microcredential Providers	• Who are the leading providers of microcredentials in South Africa, and for what purposes do they provide microcredentials? • How do microcredential users and their needs differ between the formal, non-formal and informal sectors?
Microcredential Implementation and Effectiveness	• How effective have microcredentials been in meeting their envisaged educational and vocational objectives in South Africa? • What are the socio-economic impacts of microcredentials in South Africa, particularly regarding access, equity and inclusion? • What are the predominant challenges and enablers affecting the implementation, impact and long-term sustainability of microcredentials?
Microcredential Policy Development	• How is quality assurance managed for microcredentials, and what progress has been made toward institutional and national standards in South Africa? • To what extent are microcredentials integrated into national and regional qualifications frameworks, and what are the challenges and opportunities in this process?

1.3 SOUTH AFRICAN OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

The potential of microcredentials in South Africa needs to be explored from the lens of high-level country demographics, employment statistics and types of industries. South Africa's population was recorded at just over 62 million in the 2022 census conducted by Stats SA, with 21.6 million of the population falling within the 15-34 age group, defined as youth in South Africa and who form a key potential beneficiary group of increased access to microcredentials that enhance employment opportunities (Stats SA 2022). Females comprised 51.5% of the total population, while males accounted for 48.5%. Access to microcredentials will need to take account of gender differentials and the extent to which access is equitable across genders. Gauteng, considered the economic hub of the country, had the highest and most highly concentrated population with 15 million residents, whereas the Northern Cape had the smallest but also the most dispersed population at 1.3 million in 2022 (Stats SA 2022). These demographic profiles present different challenges for generating access to microcredentials, for example, access to the internet and to technology may be more limited in the more rural, remote locations. During the 2022 census, it was reported that Gauteng had the highest proportion of in-migration (both interprovincial and international), with 5.2 million people entering the province (Stats SA 2022). While online access to microcredentials could offer an opportunity for adult migrants to access learning opportunities, migrants may also struggle with online access and access to technology. In 2022, isiZulu was the most often spoken language in households (24.4%), 16.3% of South Africans spoke isiXhosa, and only 8.7% of South Africans reported speaking English most often in their households (Stats SA 2022). English is currently the dominant language of the internet and of education, creating potential access barriers for people whose mother tongue is not English.

Of the working-age population in South Africa (41 million), the labour force participation rate (the number of persons in the labour force as a percentage of the working-age population) was 60.7% (24.9 million) while the absorption rate (the proportion of the working age population that is employed) was 40.7% (16.7 million); the official unemployment rate in the country during the first quarter of 2024 was recorded at 32.9%, with 59.7% of the population aged 15-24 being unemployed and the 25-34 age group recording an unemployment rate of 40.7% (Stats SA 2024). Within the youth category, an important labour market statistic to note is that of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET), which was 43.8% for the 15-34 age group in the first quarter of 2024 (Stats SA 2024). Unemployed, unskilled youth in the South African context are seen as potential beneficiaries of microcredentials, but this needs to be considered in light of the already known trend of people who are qualified/ hold qualifications being those who access microcredentials.

Table 2 contrasts employment (in thousands) by industry for the first quarter of 2023 and 2024.

In six of the ten industries, employment increased, with the largest increases being in the Finance, Trade, and Private Households industries respectively. Employment decreased in the following industries: Community and Social Services, Manufacturing, and Utilities. Some of the key economic sectors listed by the Government of South Africa website include Mining, Transport, Energy, Manufacturing, Tourism, and Agriculture (RSA 2024). This data provides a point of departure for identifying the broad sectoral and occupational areas where need and demand for microcredentials is emerging and also the profile of the likely local institutional, public, private and global providers. The social, economic and education and training conditions explored below provide further indications and anticipation of priorities for microcredential provision.

Table 2: South African employment by industry for the first quarter of 2023 and 2024 (Source: Stats SA, 2024)

Industry	Number (thousands)	
	Q1 2023	Q1 2024
Agriculture	888	941
Mining	413	454
Manufacturing	1654	1606
Utilities	135	105
Construction	1201	1215
Trade	3269	3471
Transport	992	1062
Finance	2667	2914
Community and social services	3902	3791
Private households	1056	1178
TOTAL	**16 192**	**16 745**

The high-level labour force statistics, including that of NEETs, and employment statistics across industries provide some signals for the potential of microcredentials. For example, microcredentials pose opportunities for NEETs to access learning, although facilitation of links to employment outcomes would need to be researched. Furthermore, sectors which have seen increases or declines in employment could consider the potential of microcredentials for bridging any skills gaps. Higher employment levels are unlikely to be realised with the provision of microcredentials only, though. The skills demand from industry needs to be bolstered. Capabilities to connect individuals with the requisite skills to suitable employment opportunities and the availability and resources for those opportunities are needed as well. In other words, the PSET system and the labour market need to be completely aligned. Without this alignment, the potential impact of the availability and provisioning of microcredentials would be lost.

The links between the supply of skills produced by the education system and their expression as employment in the labour market are contested in South Africa (Reddy & Mncwango 2021). It is clear, from the unemployment

statistics quoted above alone that industry skills demand is shifting, and the labour market does not absorb enough young people to provide stable pathways from the PSET system into employment. Moreover, when employment statistics are juxtaposed against those for educational achievement, several things become clear. As Statistics South Africa states: 'Possessing a tertiary education, especially a degree, enhances one's likelihood of securing employment' (Stats SA 2024: 9). The implication of this statement is that as educational attainment decreases, so does the likelihood of employment. Naturally, employment is not the only objective of education, nor can employment be used as a direct indicator of educational success since this indicator is directly affected by the wider economy. It is nonetheless worthwhile to examine the relationship between the two in South Africa.

South Africa is characterised by the triple challenges of high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality. Education is arguably one pathway to enabling more positive outcomes within the context of these challenges. The legislative context in South African education and training is underpinned by a social justice mandate which promotes access, equity and inclusivity across all types of learning – formal, non-formal and informal. Mechanisms including the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and both credit-bearing and non-credit bearing learning are supported. It is within this context that the potential of microcredentials is explored.

The draft Medium-Term Development Framework (MTDF) for the period 2024-2029 will be important to consider as the potential of microcredentials is further explored in 2025 (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2024). The MTDF includes:

- Inclusive growth and job creation;
- Reducing poverty and tackling the high cost of living; and
- Building a capable, ethical and developmental state.

In line with the MTDF, it will be important to consider growing access to quality education, advancing digitisation and also the growing areas of the economy such as the green economy, the marine economy, the hydrogen economy, the tourism sector, and the agricultural sector. The realistic role that microcredentials, when integrated into the education and training policy frameworks, can play will have to be carefully explored.

> ***The potential of microcredentials in South Africa needs to be explored from the lens of high-level country demographics, employment statistics and types of industries.***

CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF PLAY OF MICROCREDENTIALS IN SOUTH AFRICA

2.1 MICROCREDENTIAL CONCEPTUALISATION

2.1.1 What are the key drivers and attractors for adopting microcredentials in South Africa, and how do these align with current social, educational and workforce trends?

Globally, factors such as race, gender and familial socio-economic status play a strong role in determining individuals' educational outcomes, and such educational outcomes have a strong relationship with employment status (Reddy & Mncwango 2021). To dramatically oversimplify the trajectory then, low socio-economic status is associated with low educational outcomes, which in turn are associated with few opportunities for formal employment. This initial inequality of opportunity is often associated with inequality of outcomes in later life. This brief discussion raises issues of particular concern in South Africa, where inequality is not only at an extremely high level but has been on an increasing trend since the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Mtapuri & Tinarwo 2021).

In this unequal society, and considering the labour market advantages conferred by educational status, it is important to examine the opportunities available to South Africans in the PSET system as each individual attempts to transition from education and training into employment or other income generating roles. While university or degree-level education seems to confer significant advantages on job-seekers in South Africa, education achievements below university education show dramatically reduced chances of employment (Stats SA 2024). Thus, while university graduates had an 11.8% unemployment rate in Q1 2024, graduates of 'other tertiary' institutions had an unemployment rate of 22.5% - still much better than those with just a matric with an unemployment rate of 34.5%. It is clear that access to formal employment becomes ever more attenuated at levels of attainment below university graduates.

Youth unemployment

From the preceding subsections, it is evident that South Africa's unemployment challenges, particularly those facing the youth in general and NEET youth specifically, present a complex issue requiring a multifaceted approach rather than solely relying on the formal education and training system. Due to the nature of the formal labour market in South Africa, a middle-income country, labour market entrants are expected to have some form of formal education, even at entry-level positions (Keevy & Molokwane forthcoming). The low completion rates for both university and TVET students and skills mismatches noted in section 1.3 provide an opportunity to apply microcredentials to potentially address these gaps in the South African labour market.

Industry currency

It has been suggested that the development of microcredentials should be prioritised for occupations in the service or industry sectors in South Africa due to a large proportion of the workforce being engaged in these sectors (Mtapuri & Tinarwo). In addition, different sectors have varying skills requirements that may not be fully captured by broad qualifications. It is possible that microcredentials could cater to these specific needs by offering targeted training that addresses immediate and sector-specific skills gaps. This is particularly useful in high-growth sectors or those undergoing rapid technological changes, where the ability to quickly upskill or reskill the workforce is crucial.

Skills anticipation

Microcredentials also offer an opportunity to improve skills anticipation and responsiveness. In South Africa, Sector Skills Plans (SSPs) do not always anticipate future training needs accurately as businesses tend to report immediate vacancies rather than future skills requirements, leading to a shortfall in strategic skills planning (OECD 2017: 10,33). Microcredentials can be quickly developed and implemented in response to emerging

skills needs identified through real-time labour market analysis. They allow for agile updates and the introduction of new skills training programmes that can better meet future labour market demands. However, as mentioned in section 1.3, unless there are mechanisms for alignment with labour market needs, which the SSP ought to be part of, microcredentials on their own cannot improve skills anticipation.

Microcredentials, due to their flexibility, may cater for different schedules and budgets and therefore promote continuous formal and informal learning and could contribute to a more equitable, socially just and thriving learning society for everyone. Microcredentials also allow people to dip in and out of education in a cost-effective way to meet their learning and employment needs; but they could also, if misused, perpetuate inequality if the most disadvantaged are offered multiple, incoherent, un-stackable microcredential programmes that do not equate to substantive skills or culminate in the conferring of a qualification. The use of microcredentials will require clearly defined articulation pathways, else their potential purpose and value could be defeated.

Technological changes during and post the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to changes in the education and training landscape (Hughes 2021). Technology is a key driver of microcredentials, which are often offered digitally. Ingram & Norman (2023) argue that technological developments may create further drivers for flexible learning. According to UNESCO (2022), digital media are transforming the ways people create, share and learn from educational content available on the world wide web. However, we should also be vigilant and address issues of the technological divide in relation to location and socio-economic status, still largely drawn on racial grounds.

A strong driver of online microcredential usage is that the business model allows for learning programmes to be offered at much lower prices than traditional onsite learning provision. Modular and flexible programmes are designed to enable users to study at their own pace and convenience. Online microcredentials allow for integrating multimedia, including videos, simulations and gamified learning, which shows potential to enhance engagement and retention (see Sharma et al. 2024). This online capacity can be applied to skills development or upskilling units of learning to improve employability.

In the South African labour market context, employers may well be showing some interest in how types of microcredentials can be finely targeted and quickly developed to retain workforce competitiveness, while work-seekers are likely to be exploring these credentials as a way to enhance their opportunities. However, empirical evidence that confirms these trends in particular occupational or sectoral labour markets is not yet publicly available. Circumstances in South Africa suggest that these trends are emerging, perhaps more strongly in certain sectors than others. On the other hand, many low-income individuals and households are likely to miss these opportunities currently and in the future, especially where their financial resources are limited or members of households hold low formal qualifications or are employed in the informal economy. The outcome, as it seems presently, is that the alignment of microcredentials with domestic labour market trends of demand and supply will be more concentrated within particular sectors and occupations, and access presents a concern for population groups that predominantly depend on informally acquired skills and have limited disposable income that can be diverted to education and training.

Microcredentials have gained increasing attention across the world within the context of lifelong learning, flexible learning pathways and drivers such as technological advancements requiring reskilling and upskilling. There is a growing call for shorter, focused, in-time learning for employment purposes to meet industry needs (UNESCO 2023). Being responsive to demands for new forms of credentialing and defining how these

fit with existing qualifications frameworks and an emerging digital credentialing ecosystem is a key consideration (Keevy & Chakroun 2019). Qualification frameworks are consequently evolving in a context of dynamic and rapid technological, social and economic changes. Accelerated globalisation and internationalisation of labour markets, advances in digital technologies, digitalisation of education, and the green transition are changing skills needs and are hence also key drivers of microcredentials. The strong focus on inclusivity, equity and lifelong learning for all as expressed in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is another (CEDEFOP et al. 2019). It is argued that qualifications frameworks therefore need to be more digital and agile. The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is amongst many others which will need to constantly evolve by becoming more dynamic, responsive and cognisant of digital opportunities while simultaneously foregrounding the integrity and rigour of the education and training system, which must benefit the learner above all else.

Microcredentials, according to Keevy & Molokwane (forthcoming), have attracted interest in the following economic sectors in South Africa:

- Information technology (IT) microcredentials in software development, cybersecurity and data analysis.
- Entrepreneurship and small business microcredentials in financial literacy and small business management for startups.
- Manufacturing and engineering microcredentials including in machine operation and technical maintenance in production systems.
- Tourism and hospitality microcredentials in hospitality management, tour guiding and customer service.
- Green energy and environmental sustainability microcredentials related to green energy, sustainability and environmental management in the renewable energy sector.
- Health sciences and applied sciences, where microcredentials enable upskilling of medical personnel in rapid medical advances through new technology applications.

There is potential for microcredentials to enhance South Africa's education and training landscape by building on existing frameworks and short learning experiences if and where they address mismatches in the labour market, contributing to improved skills anticipation and providing sector-specific, responsive training solutions. Should these benefits of microcredentials be harnessed, they could potentially strengthen the country's capacity to meet future educational and workforce challenges (Varadarajan et al. 2023). Further empirical research as well as collaboration across the qualification ecosystem and labour market could strengthen our understanding of the potential of microcredentials to enhance the education sector and labour market in South Africa.

2.1.2 How are microcredentials defined and perceived by various stakeholders in South Africa, and what impact does this have on the value and challenges of micro-credentials?

2.1.2.1 Official definitions

Microcredentials are an important and growing area of interest in South Africa, just as is the case across the PoMiSA partner countries, the African continent (ACQF 2023), the Southern African region (UNICEF 2024), and also globally (Cedefop 2022). In the case of South Africa, early policy considerations have been explored by the DHET, which issued a discussion paper on the recognition of learning and microcredentials (DHET 2022). The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE 2022) is also in the process of finalising a review of the

Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) which regulates all higher education qualifications in the country. In the meantime, SAQA, which is the custodian of the South African NQF, has produced its own discussion document on the 'recognition of small units of credit and non-credit bearing learning programmes' (SAQA 2022b).

Key features of the emerging policy considerations related to microcredentials in South Africa include:

- The need to recognise that learning is taking place not only through formal qualifications but also non-formally and informally, such as: in industry and the world of work; in professional fields; through online and international studies; through MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), through self-directed learning and open educational resources; and through the development of soft and transversal skills (DHET 2022);
- The adoption of an enabling approach to promoting flexibility around the recognition of and greater articulation between informal, non-formal and formal learning which includes microcredentials (CHE 2022);
- The possibility of moving toward a new or revised NQF 'that attempts to recognise a wider variety of types of learning' and proposes the development of 'enabling policies and guidelines' (SAQA 2022b: 15); and
- Responding to skills gaps, boosting the possibilities of access to jobs among youth as well as adults, and making learning more learner-centred, flexible and accessible (DHET 2022).

Key concerns voiced by the DHET in South Africa are that 'the lack of an agreed definition and a global taxonomy' of microcredentials can be confusing, that stakeholder engagement and buy-in is essential, and that engagement with industry and employers should take place (DHET 2022: 1-2). There are also concerns that the commodification of teaching and learning might have harmful effects on the quality thereof as well as impinge on academic freedom, while potentially threatening the cohesion of qualifications and having a negative impact on disadvantaged or marginalised groups (CHE 2022; SAQA 2014).

Finally, as a ratifying member of the Addis Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications on Higher Education in African States (UNESCO 2014), South Africa is obliged to move towards the recognition of foreign qualifications and partial studies (incomplete in duration or content in relation to a qualification but subjected to evaluation and validation), which could be seen as linked or related to microcredentials and therefore create some political impetus for the latter.

According to the CHE (2023), the development of policies and strategies in South Africa regarding microcredentials is underway although 'the full extent of provision is unknown, along with their quality, relevance, usefulness, stackability and potential articulation and alignment with each other and with formal qualifications' (CHE 2023: 1). Given all the unknowns, a fair assumption is that there is no consensus on a definition. Indeed, one of the issues the CHE invites consideration of 'is a suitable definition for microcredentials in the South African context' (CHE, 2023: 1). Consequently, defining microcredentials from within the South African context is an emergent exercise.

A microcredential, as provisionally defined by the internal SAQA Microcredentials Task Team (2024), is a small unit of learning that is credit-bearing and stand-alone, may be stackable, and is assessed, quality assured and certified. While there are already some offerings of microcredentials in the absence of a regulated and funded framework, there is also a sense that the regulatory bodies should validate and recognise microcredentials for purposes of credibility and trust. In South Africa, it seems that public policy plays an important role in the creation and implementation of a microcredential ecosystem.

The South African policy landscape of learning, education and training is framed, governed and regulated by the NQF, for which implementation is overseen by SAQA. According to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act No. 67 of 2008, as amended, the NQF is regarded as a transformative educational policy instrument that seeks to facilitate access, mobility and progression in education, training and career paths. The NQF includes registered qualifications across schooling, TVET and higher education. The governance and regulation of the NQF has led to sub-qualifications frameworks as well as quality assurance bodies forming an ecosystem that includes institutions that deliver the qualifications.

Microcredentials, within the context of the NQF, could present as one type of learning opportunity enabling skilling, re-skilling and upskilling for learning and employment. SAQA, the DHET, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and three Quality Councils (QCs) which quality assure qualifications registered on the NQF, namely the CHE, overseeing higher education, the QCTO overseeing TVET, and the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi) overseeing schooling, have key roles to play in such a context.

Furthermore, various national policies will inform and impact the conceptualisation, development and implementation of microcredentials. These include, amongst others, policies on the recognition of prior learning, articulation, credit accumulation and transfer, and the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF. These national policies are currently silent on microcredentials as a concept and will need to be revisited. At the same time, SAQA, the CHE and the QCTO have policies, procedures and guidelines that refer to short learning experiences, their articulation or lack thereof with qualifications, as well as relevant quality assurance criteria and processes. The relationship and connection of short learning programmes to microcredentials is crucial for understanding the potential of microcredentials in the South African context. Reinventing the wheel or generating another layer of complexity in the system would not facilitate the integration of microcredentials into learning pathways or the positioning of related skills into the labour market.

Forms or modalities of learning that are smaller than qualifications in South Africa include part-qualifications, short learning programmes and skills programmes that represent smaller units of learning. A part qualification is an 'assessed unit of learning which is registered as part of a qualification' (SAQA 2022a). The National Learners' Records Database (NLRD), which is the management information system of the NQF managed by SAQA, records learning achievements against these NQF-registered part qualifications, many of which have low credit values and notional hours of study. Part qualifications are offered in the trades and occupations space and are recognised and quality assured by the QCTO. The QCTO points out that skills programmes in particular share similarities to short courses or microcredentials (Naidoo 2024). These programmes are described as being developed quickly by providers and enabling learners to skill, reskill and upskill for the purposes of learning and transitioning into work. Furthermore, a holder of a skills programme is able to receive recognition towards a full qualification if this is the route of choice. In the higher education context, the CHE in 2016 released its good practice guide for the quality management of such short courses (CHE 2016), foregrounding the importance of developing and managing quality courses. One challenge is to consider how such courses or smaller units of learning can be integrated into the South African NQF and the various opportunities and challenges this may pose. A related challenge for all education contexts (school education, TVET and higher education) involves considering how non-credit bearing units of learning are made visible and are recognised.

Smaller units of learning have therefore been an important part of the learning ecosystem in South Africa. Considerations about how to

more deeply and meaningfully embed them into the fabric of this learning ecosystem in innovative and flexible ways are key to strengthening future developments. Conceptual clarity around the terms used will be important. South Africa has recognised the need to define microcredentials to be contextually relevant and aligned to global conceptualisations to enable comparisons across country systems.

Drawing on the work of the UNESCO expert panel mentioned in section 1.1.2 (UNESCO 2022), the basic tenets of a working definition are provided in the continuum Table 3.

Forms of learning that conform with UNESCO's (2022) definition of microcredentials are offered in South Africa, and a range of short learning experiences are on offer (see SAQA 2003; CHE 2016; QCTO 2024). What emerges is the need for a definition of a microcredential which can be applied and implemented in the South African context, and that aligns with the existing practices and expectations of short learning experiences. Moreover, the implications of implementing the definition require attention.

By analysing individual aspects of UNESCO's (2022) definition, we are able to consider the potential for adopting the definition in the South African context as well as identify implications of implementation. SAQA, in collaboration with the QCs and education providers already provides criteria, guidelines and platforms where short learning experiences result in providing 'a record of focused learning achievement verifying what learners know, understand or can do' that 'includes assessment based on clearly defined standards' so that such records can be 'awarded by a trusted provider'. Similarly, these records of short learning experiences have 'stand-alone value and also contribute to or complement other microcredentials [short learning experiences that are recognised] or macro-credentials, [registered and accredited qualifications] including through recognition of prior learning; and meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance.' (UNESCO 2022: 6).

At a basic level, the qualifications framework and system in South Africa is able to accommodate the integration of microcredentials. For implementation, there would need to be considerable work put into conceptual alignment of and advocacy on the connection between microcredentials and short learning experiences. This work has begun. For example, the University of Johannesburg (2022) recommended the development of a microcredential framework where short learning programmes are rebranded and reoriented accordingly for internal use. Of course, all is not that simple due mainly to three key aspects of UNESCO's definition (2022: 6) where there is contention within the South African qualifications framework and system: definition of 'a trusted provider'; how and when short learning experiences might 'contribute to or complement other microcredentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning'; and the mechanisms and point at which 'standards required by relevant quality assurance' are met.

> ***Microcredentials, within the context of the NQF, could present as one type of learning opportunity enabling skilling, re-skilling and upskilling for learning and employment.***

Table 3: Characteristics of microcredentials (ILO & UNICEF 2024)

Characteristic	At least	Middle ground	At most
Features	Record of learning achievement that may be non-formal, informal or formal.	Has a defined statement of purpose and learning outcomes and addresses the need(s) of an employer, industry, market, and/or community.	Credential of assessed learning issued by a trusted institution.
Purpose	Helps facilitate lifelong learning by engaging people in learning activities.	Just-in-time and flexible learning that addresses personal, societal, cultural and labour market needs.	Results in technical skills and in-demand soft-skills that allow individuals to adapt quickly to the ever-changing labour market.
Scale	Niche course; small private online course (SPOC).	Stacked into a larger credential or be included in a working portfolio.	Various learning modes, from small units to larger components of a full degree; integrated into a bespoke national platform and relevant to national higher education & TVET system/labour market policies.
Delivery	Offered over a shorter or flexible period; may or may not be formal; paper-based or digital.	Provided on various platforms through collaborations between different organisations, such as businesses, non-profits, and HEIs.	Modular, portable & digital.
Rigour	Meets institutional requirements (private or public).	Meets standards required by relevant quality assurance regime.	Meets independent standards, including those set by industry and/or professional associations.
Portability	Not recognised as stand-alone formal educational qualification.	Contributes to or complements other microcredentials or macro-credentials, including through RPL.	Has stand-alone value; can accumulate into or be complementary to a formal qualification, larger credential, or degree.
Regulation	Exists outside the formal system; unregulated.	Early signs of integration into a more seamless regulatory system.	Included in mainstream regulatory systems.
Ownership	Strong licensing and copyright requirements; student data held by provider; verifications as paid for service.	Can easily be shared with employers or social networks through a variety of mediums, including digital platforms.	Owned by the learner through adherence to self-sovereign principles.

Trusted providers in the South African context are those recognised in some way by the CHE or QCTO. The processes followed by each of the QCs to recognise providers will be an important consideration. For implementation, it might be necessary to consider whether and to what extent the alignment of processes is possible. This will have implications for how and when short learning experiences might 'contribute to or complement other microcredentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning' mechanisms and the point at which 'standards required by relevant quality assurance' are met for short learning experiences.

How and when short learning experiences might 'contribute to or complement other microcredentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning' depends on conditions in qualification sub-frameworks and how RPL processes are conducted. The HEQSF does not currently make provision for short learning experiences which would potentially also be microcredentials. As such, the CHE does not accredit or quality assure such short learning experiences. HEIs are expected to ensure the quality of the offering and that learners do receive records of their learning achievements. How such learning achievements would 'contribute to or complement other' learning achievements is currently not seamlessly regulated beyond HEIs that independently undertake this role.

If such short learning experiences cannot be accredited by quality assurance agencies, they are not registered by SAQA. Moreover, while assessment is based on clearly defined standards and awarded by trusted providers, the complementarity with other credentialing processes in the South African context would need to be determined if they are to seamlessly 'contribute to or complement other microcredentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning'. The CHE (2023) suggests that where short learning experiences are part of formal qualifications but taken for non-degree purposes, they could be recognised through Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) mechanisms. Existing CAT mechanisms and guidelines, together with implementation opportunities and challenges, would thus have to be closely scrutinised to comprehensively grasp the potential of adopting the UNESCO (2022) definition of microcredentials. A tension that remains marginal to the existing policy framework (which is perhaps addressed in current CAT mechanisms) is how and when short learning experiences that are not part of formal qualifications would 'contribute to or complement other microcredentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning'; in other words, how would they stack for individual learners.

RPL processes are probably open and flexible enough to allow for such short learning experiences to contribute to or complement others. At the same time, RPL processes are generally unique, and it could be cumbersome to rely on individual RPL processes to ensure that all microcredentials contribute to an individual's learning pathway. It would also be useful to investigate how short learning experiences are currently incorporated in order to identify where existing opportunities and challenges might be found in current RPL procedures and processes.

2.1.2.2 Stakeholder perceptions

The DHET, SAQA and the QCs are committed to considering the role of microcredentials in education, training and work and have initiated discussions about microcredentials through discussion documents and communiques, amongst other things (see CHE 2023; DHET 2022; SAQA 2022b). These discussions have provoked various questions and considerations to guide and inform future directions. Key among them is contemplating the extent to which microcredentials will enhance access to learning for diverse and underserved learning communities, and managing the commodification of education through microcredentials while retaining integrity in the learning process and education and

training system. Other considerations include conceptualising microcredentials, engaging around credit-bearing and non-credit bearing microcredentials and how these will be recognised, quality assurance, and the practicalities of recognising and implementing microcredentials. Legislation, policies, systems and processes will need to be considered to enable the integration of microcredentials into the existing NQF ecosystem.

The South African education and learning ecosystem, through the South African NQF, supports learner mobility within South Africa, regionally and continentally. Further afield, South Africa has played key roles in the development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) and the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) which provide the impetus for enabling learner mobility. The country has moreover supported initiatives such as the Addis Convention (UNESCO 2014), which, amongst other things, establishes a legal framework for fair and transparent evaluation of higher education qualifications in the African region and promotes the mobility of students, and the Groningen Declaration Network (GDN), which supports academic and professional digital credential mobility. Microcredentials are one mechanism through which such mobility could potentially be realised. Furthermore, the intersection between RPL and microcredentials in facilitating learner mobility will be an important avenue to explore and warrants deep research to inform policy and practice.

Against this backdrop, South Africa is in a good position to engage robustly regarding microcredentials: it has a firmly established and embedded NQF which has benefited from detailed review processes and continues to improve; various entities within South Africa are in various stages of discussing and contemplating the potential of microcredentials in the South African context, some of which were mentioned earlier; other stakeholders such as education and training providers, professional bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sector education and training authorities (SETAs), business, and labour all have key roles in advancing microcredentials conceptually and practically. The voices of these stakeholders are key to developing a common understanding of microcredentials. Participating in initiatives such as PoMiSA (see POMISA 2023) will enable the country to contemplate how it will accommodate microcredentials into its current NQF system and the related implications. In doing so, an incremental, consultative and innovative approach that takes the learners along (access and equity) and ensures integrity in the education and training system is key.

2.1.2.3 Impact of conceptualisations

Conceptualising and implementing microcredentials was not taken up strongly by the 6th administration, but recent changes in the political leadership and administration in government may lead to policy reforms that accelerate progress in regulating microcredentials. However, the broad span of representation in cabinet implies a diversity of views, which may still work against quick movement and decisions; nonetheless, rapid action may still be required. At this stage, political will has not yet been signalled, and 'buy-in' will be required from the current administration for acceptance and approval of microcredentials within the South African NQF, especially if such acceptance is linked to regulation and funding.

As outlined in section 2.1.3.1, the PSET system rests on the South African NQF as a relational tool for understanding qualifications and how they articulate with one another. There are also several systems in place to signal the relationship between the labour market and qualifications. Central among these is the process that is overseen by the SETAs that are tasked to facilitate demand and supply and administer a Skill Levy to incentivise employer training and skills development. In contrast to universities, which operate on a system of institutional independence as detailed in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 as amended,

the remainder of the PSET system is directed by planning documents such as the SSPs, the national list of Occupations in High Demand (OIHD) (DHET 2024), and the Critical Skills List (DHA 2023) published by various public sector entities. A large amount of the data analysed is viewed through the lens of the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO), a South African derivation of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO).

One challenge with the use of the OFO in relation to qualifications and qualification development is that this is one of two occupational classification systems in use in South Africa – the OFO used in the PSET system and the South African Standard Classification of Occupations (SASCO) in use by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA 2012). Although both classification systems are derived from the ISCO there is, unfortunately, an imperfect correspondence between them, and thus Statistics South Africa applies a somewhat different lens when analysing the labour market than does the PSET system (Allais 2021). A larger and more fundamental challenge with SSPs is that they are conducted in a manner that is largely compliance driven and do not adequately consider the challenge that many individual businesses tend to have a short-term perspective and prioritise immediate skills shortages. Individual businesses providing data about their immediate vacancies and extrapolating this information to indicate future skills needs in the short- to medium-term has proved largely unsuccessful in the South African environment (Allais 2021). As noted, if microcredentials are to realise their potential to increase employment opportunities, instruments such as the SSPs would need to be strengthened to achieve their objectives. At the same time, research and information on demand and supply has broadened through the ongoing Labour Market Intelligence programme launched in 2012 to support and enrich labour market planning[1].

Ultimately, the South African PSET system employs a host of methods to perform the task of linking supply with demand in the labour market and has a multiplicity of institutions that carry aspects of this mandate. A key challenge faced by the nation is perhaps in ensuring effective coordination when it comes to both documents and institutions and weaving the various strands into a singular plan of action in both determining demand and linking it with what the PSET system can supply.

At the same time, while SSPs represent a form of baseline data on the labour market in South Africa, they do not provide sufficient information to perform the 'skills anticipation' function that is part of their intended purpose. Hence the existence of national-level documents such as the OIHD mentioned above, which has been methodologically fluid in its construction over various iterations. The 2018 and 2020 iterations, for instance, used SSP data as part of their analytical frame (DHET 2024) whereas the most recent 2024 version of the document used a direct survey of employers (among others) and did not use SSP data. Another central document for skills planning in South Africa is the Critical Skills List published by the Department of Home Affairs – although this document is intended to guide immigration policy and is better thought of as adjacent to the PSET system rather than embedded within it. The Critical Skills list is also constructed along unclear methodological guidelines creating challenges for interpretation and use of the data it presents.

The PSET system itself is characterised by multiple levels, layers and entities. At the apex is the national DHET, followed by SAQA, the QCs, the National Skills Authority (NSA), the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) and the SETAs. The multiple actors responsible for aspects of the system mirror the multiple documents that provide data on the system, in that they are not always in alignment, and it is

[1] https://lmi-research.org.za/ Recent publications include provincial lists of skills in high demand (Mpumalanga, Western Cape) and new sectoral studies including identification of skills needed in the South African Hydrogen economy.

difficult to coordinate and interpret the data. Unfortunately, the HRDC (Kraak et al. 2013), the NSA (2019), and academics like Khunoethe & Reddy (2023) continue to find 'confusion and lack of alignment' as a characteristic of the South African PSET system.

2.2 PUBLIC & PRIVATE SECTOR MICROCREDENTIAL PROVIDERS

2.2.1 Who are the leading providers of microcredentials in South Africa and for what purposes?

2.2.1.1 Public and private sector provider landscape

The significant potential of microcredentials as a form of recognised learning lies in the ability of multiple providers, both public and private, across formal and informal learning environments, formal learning institutions and workplaces to offer fit-for-purpose learning suited to context, time and space. Given the significant challenges in access to worthwhile learning opportunities In the South African context and the subsequent knock-on effect on access to work and employment opportunities, the offering of quality, relevant, timeous, scaled microcredentials by a wide variety of providers can greatly enhance access to learning opportunities (and possibly to work opportunities).

The range of learning opportunities that can be availed by microcredentials extends beyond those that respond to industry and workplace needs. Microcredentials can equip learners with specific knowledge, skills and competences tailored to meet societal, personal, cultural and labour market needs (MICROBOL 2022: 4).

As yet, there are no established national policies and strategies in place to specifically facilitate and regulate the offering of microcredentials. At the same time, the previous section demonstrates that the policy framework makes provision for a range of short learning experiences. How trusted providers are accredited and recognised within the framework was however noted as an aspect that requires attention. Indeed, there is no national register in place of providers of microcredentials although there have been moves by some providers to establish one. As such, there are current offerings in the national education ecosystem which, while not historically termed or called microcredentials, could be positioned as such by the providers offering them. These include, for example, some of the short courses offered by higher education providers and the part-qualifications offered as part of the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) as well as training opportunities offered by industry or organisations strongly linked to industry. Some universities are taking steps to develop institutional frameworks and/or policies for microcredentials. (See for example North-West University 2023).

Industries and enterprises are also incorporating microcredentials into their skills development programmes to enable improvements in the productivity of their workforce and increase enterprise competitiveness. Concurrently there are signs that private education and training providers are developing microcredentials for enterprise training and also targeting individuals who are interested in opportunities to improve their employment chances in a context of high levels of unemployment.

Some insights into the scope of microcredential offerings in South Africa are indicative of growing differentiation between sectors and occupations but also reflect the variety of needs that microcredentials can be adapted to serve. The examples provided here reflect how industries on the one hand and their counterpart microcredential service providers on the other are recognising needs and responding creatively. The headings that identify the form and purpose of these microcredentials reflect variety:

Sector focused microcredentials - Construction

A private further education and training college registered with the national DHET offers programmes that are accredited by the South African Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) which has developed courses in Labour Intensive Construction (NQF 1-7), Contractor Development Training (to support small and emerging contractor businesses at NQF Levels 2 and 3) and Roadworks Construction (Entry level, Intermediate and Advanced). This college is an affiliate of the South African Bitumen Association which demonstrates its recognition within the industry, ensuring that quality standards are upheld. (South African Value Education/SAVE).

Sector focused microcredentials - IT service management

An IT services company offers microcredentials designed to support enterprises in the IT Service Management sector that target agile learning and upskilling for emerging technologies. Courses include Introduction to Data Science (6 weeks part-time) and Data Engineering (12 months part time). (Pink Elephant).

Microcredentials supporting employment of entry level youth in the labour market

This private higher education institution has 'stripes' accreditation based on modules that work like digital badges. This programme targets unemployed youth to improve and demonstrate workplace technology skills and soft skills like the ability to work well in a group and how to negotiate. (STADIO)

Short learning programmes in the business and legal fields

This includes examples of private post-school colleges offering (a) short occupational programmes for business (assistant bookkeeper, payroll administrator) and legal (conveyancing secretary, paralegal assistant) that are six months in duration (Boston College) and (b) a mix of programmes including topics like: 'Ethics and Fraud management, 'Demystifying procurement' and others). (Chartall Business College).

2.2.1.2 Product driven microcredential programmes

A global electronics company supports local microcredential training for solar panel installers (6 months). Upon completion of the course, students can seek employment or operate their own small business. (Huawei).

Support services for companies aiming to improve their internal training portfolio

This company supports companies by: (a) supporting them to fulfil the requirements to qualify for SETA funding for accredited programmes, (b) supporting conversion and migration of existing face-to-face and hard copy learning programmes and migration for online dissemination, (c) partnering with companies in creating bespoke training programmes, and (d) supplying off-the-shelf microcredentials such as: 'Handling customer challenges', 'Project management' and others. (QuayGroup).

These instances give evidence of the variety of types of microcredentials that are offered in the training market. More needs to be learned about their relative cost, the likelihood of employment and the nature of employment as sustainable or precarious, and their holders' progression after completion.

2.2.2 How do microcredential users and their needs differ between formal, non-formal, and informal sectors?

2.2.2.1 User needs in formal, non-formal and informal sectors

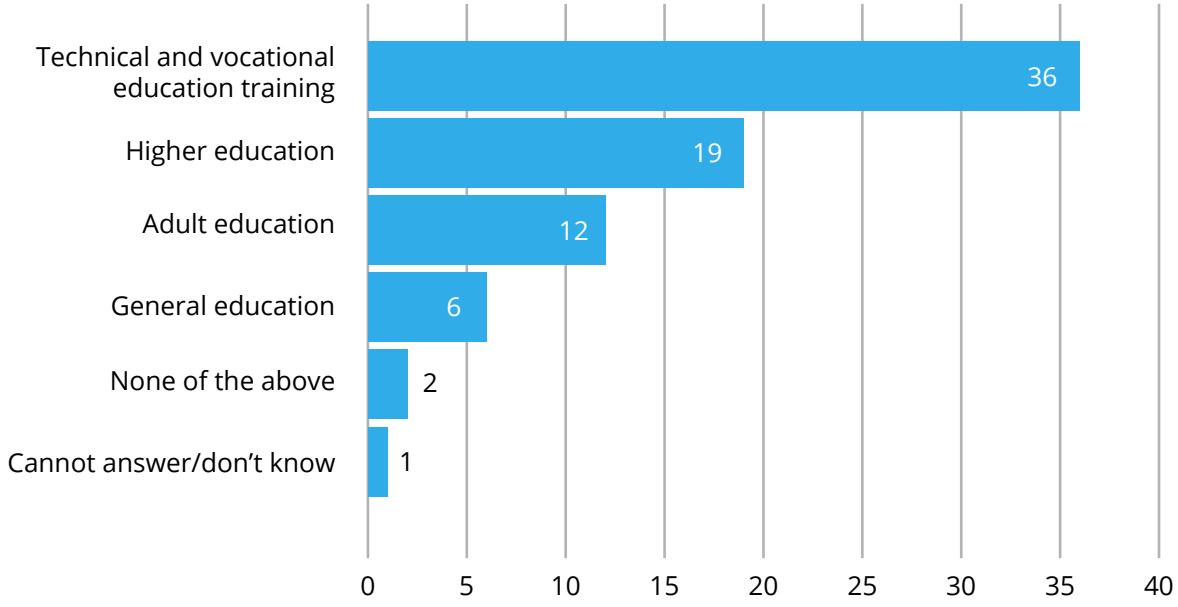
A recent ACQF survey collected data on the place and trends of microcredentials in the qualifications and lifelong learning systems in 28 African countries. The survey report (ACQF 2024) contains useful information on the education sectors in which microcredentials are being offered and the providers of microcredentials.

In line with the view that microcredentials are often seen as an instrumental tool to reskilling and upskilling within the VET sector (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2024), the survey found that microcredentials are to the largest extent offered in the TVET sector, and offered the least in general education, as Figure 1 shows.

The ACQF II report also showed that there is a wide variety of providers across the countries that participated, with TVET providers the most dominant and schools the least likely to offer microcredentials.

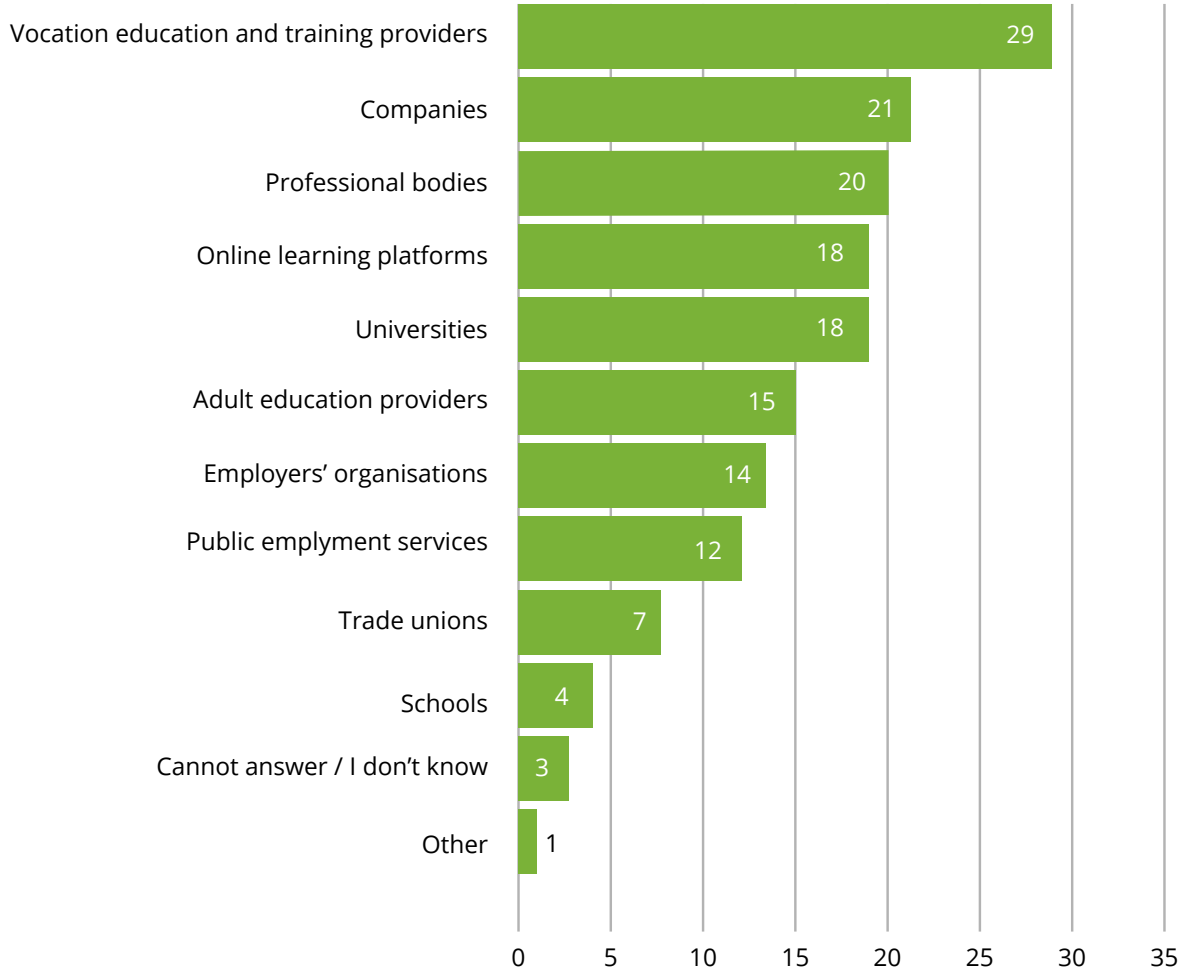
The report references South Africa as one of the countries where most of the sectors are offering microcredentials. Clearly, South African providers, at least those that participated in the survey, are already labelling their offerings as microcredentials, even in the absence of formal definitions and formal policies on microcredentials in South Africa.

Figure 1: Education and training sectors offering microcredentials (ACQF II survey report, 2024)



Microcredentials can equip learners with specific knowledge, skills and competences tailored to meet societal, personal, cultural and labour market needs.

Figure 2: Main providers of microcredentials (ACQF II survey report, 2024)



The specific country-data for South Africa shows the following providers:

Table 4: Providers offering microcredentials in South Africa (ACQF II survey report, 2024)

Schools	Vocational education and Training	Universities	Adult Education and Training	Public Employment Services	Companies	Professional Bodies	Trade Unions	Employers Organisations	Online Learning Platforms	Other
X	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	√

Drawing from the above, possible providers of microcredentials in the South African education and training ecosystem can include:

- Registered public and private education and training providers including HEIs, public colleges, TVET colleges, and community education and training colleges;
- Professional bodies;
- Employers (employers and employers' representative organisations);
- Private sector companies providing training and skills development services;
- Trade unions, even though the ACQF II survey data does not show activity at present;
- Schools in South Africa (can potentially, but are not likely to, offer microcredentials).

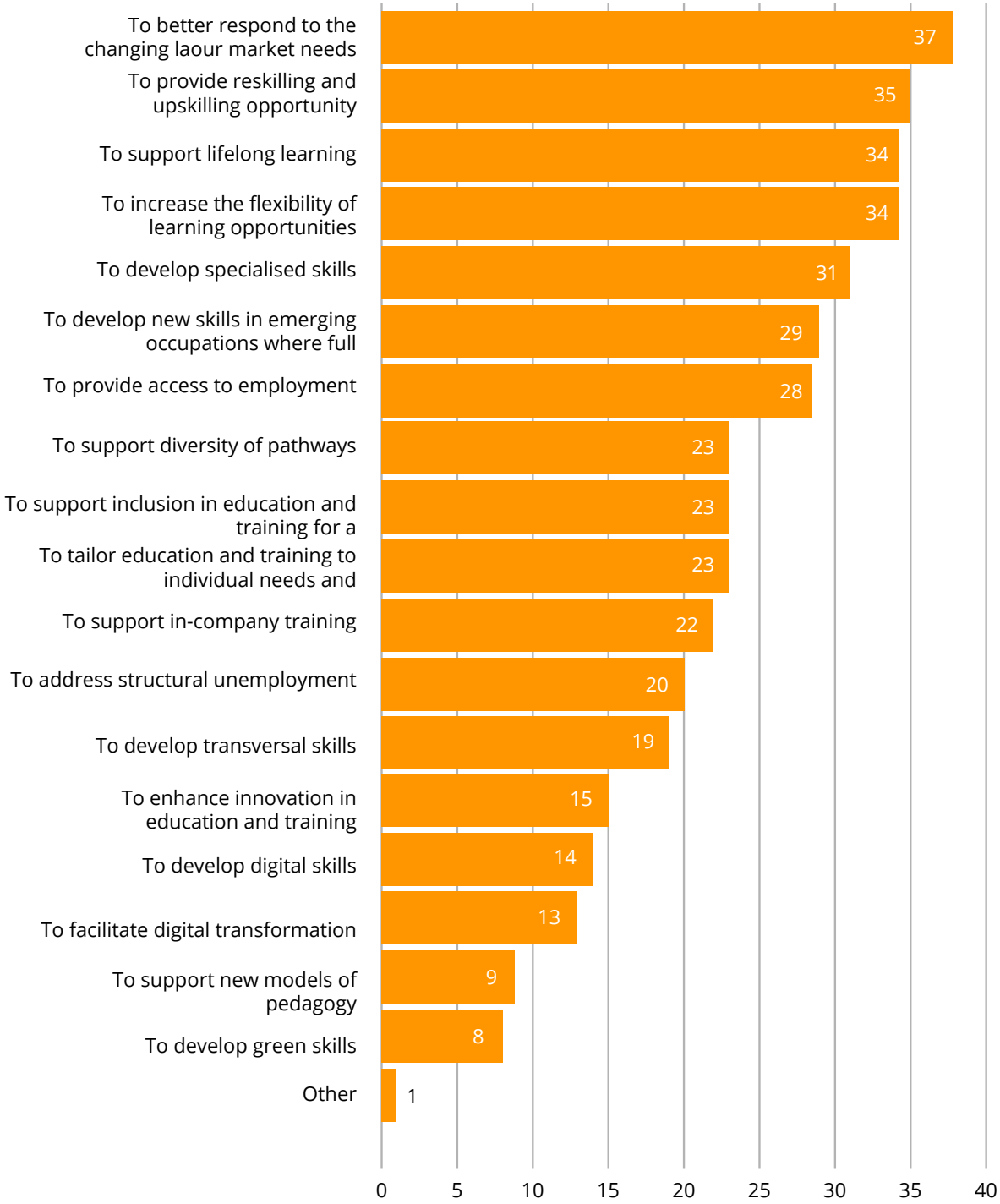
The ACQF II survey report further identified and ranked a range of purposes that microcredentials can serve, based on the responses to the survey. These are shown in Figure 3.

The strongest purposes that microcredentials are viewed to serve relate to: a) responsiveness to workplace needs and changing workplace requirements through reskilling, upskilling and access to lifelong learning opportunities; b) developing specialised skills; c) providing access to employment; and d) contributing to addressing structural unemployment. These are certainly major purposes in South Africa, where massive youth unemployment is a critical societal challenge. Unemployed people and people requiring reskilling and upskilling are thus viewed as important beneficiaries of microcredentials. This ties in then with the dominant roles that TVET institutions and workplace-related organisations must play in the offering of microcredentials. The contribution from HEIs may be more limited but potentially stronger for TVET institutions offering professional, technical and vocational qualifications.

Keevy (2024) draws from earlier UNESCO and OECD articulations to propose that examples of informal credentials are those that are self-attested by the learner; non-formal credentials include those that are endorsed by an institution, professional body or employer and not registered on a National Qualifications Framework (NQF); and formal credentials are those that are accredited and are registered on an NQF. He further proposes that microcredentials can become formal credentials as NQF systems evolve. All three forms of learning are important and needed. Additionally, mechanisms for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in formal learning contexts must be a strong feature of the national education and training system, including through mechanisms such as RPL and CAT.

> ***Industries and enterprises are also incorporating microcredentials into their skills development programmes to enable improvements in the productivity of their workforce and increase enterprise competitiveness.***

Figure 3: Main purposes of microcredentials (ACQF II survey report, 2024)



Informal learning can result from daily activities related to paid or unpaid work, family or community life or leisure, including enrolling in self-directed and self-enrichment courses on the Internet. Such informal learning practices are not automatically recognised as or towards qualifications. However, through RPL, such learning can be recognised in formal learning environments, for access and possibly for advanced credit standing. However, in a structured approach to microcredentials in a national framework context, there may be limited opportunity for the packaging and positioning of informal learning as microcredentials.

Non-formal learning opportunities, whilst not credit bearing and not registered on an NQF, are however structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support and tend to be highly valued in the contexts in which they are offered. In the South African context, these learning opportunities are typically offered by workplaces or workplace-related organisations, trade unions or professional bodies and are largely intended to develop specific competencies related to workplace and professional development requirements. Learners receive recognition mostly in the form of certificates. Some examples are industry qualifications, professional designations and associated learning like Board Examinations.

Currently, HEIs in the country also offer non-formal learning in the form of non-credit bearing short courses that do not lead to qualifications or part–qualifications on the HEQSF. 'These courses serve different developmental purposes to the participants. To the institutions themselves, the offering of such short courses provides an avenue for community or societal engagement and income generation' (CHE 2016: iii). They can improve or up-date participants' knowledge and skills in a particular field; impart new knowledge and competencies; facilitate adoption of innovation and change; and provide for personal or professional development (SAQA 2015). Going forward, some of these short courses could be positioned as microcredentials, depending on whether they meet the agreed definitions and attributes to be defined as such in a national microcredentials framework; such a positioning would likely enhance the recognition of non-credit bearing short courses.

Possibly the closest formal learning to microcredentials in the South African context are the OQSF skills programmes that are registered by the QCTO. According to the QCTO website, 'Skills programmes are occupationally directed. They focus on practical, simulation and/or work experience. The objective is for certified learners to be more likely to secure employment or be more employable. These Skills programmes can be provided at entry, intermediate, or advanced levels' (QCTO n.d.). QCTO skills programmes are credit-bearing and are pitched at a particular NQF level. They are however not registered on the NQF. The QCTO has recently proposed that skills programmes should be registered on the NQF and that doing so would enhance their recognition, for example, through CAT, and would ensure that they are rigorously quality assured, as is the case with part-qualifications. Recognising these skills programmes as microcredentials through a national microcredentials framework may serve a similar purpose.

2.3 MICROCREDENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION & EFFECTIVENESS

2.3.1 How effective are microcredentials in meeting their envisaged educational and vocational objectives in South Africa?

2.3.1.1 Educational and vocational objectives

The South African microcredential ecosystem supporting labour market inclusion is characterised by activities related to:

- Occupation-specific microcredentials in response to demand from domestic industries such as information technology, manufacturing, agriculture, financial services, tourism;
- Global online microcredentials for employment in industries that are integrated into global occupational skills systems such as software development, accounting, medical, and other domains sensitive to technology advancement;
- Government agencies developing microcredentials to advance their mandate such as the Department of Small Business Development;
- Non-government organisations developing microcredentials focused on (a) expanding the occupational opportunities of unemployed youth who may have a school leaving certificate with limited working experience; and (b) leveraging youth with informal economy working experience to gain access to formal employment. An example is Afrika Tikkun, a social enterprise which provides skills training for young people and helps them transition from training into the world of work (Keevy & Molokwane forthcoming);
- HEIs developing microcredentials through partnerships with industry and that focus on enabling transition into higher education study.

An important criterion related to achieving employment is whether the microcredential serves as a signalling device in the labour market. The signalling function is robust when the microcredential is recognised and trusted. This would relate, for instance, to whether employers are aware of microcredentials as viable and reliable indicators of the holder's eligibility for employment. Students would similarly need to have bought into the idea of microcredentials in general as a learning initiative that is worth investing in. Another consideration is whether the configuration of skills offered in the microcredential would attract the interest of employers and provide them with information on verifiable and relevant training that meets industry standards.

2.3.2 What are the socio-economic impacts of microcredentials, particularly regarding access, equity and inclusion in South Africa?

2.3.2.1 Access to education and training through microcredentials

There seems to be potential for microcredentials to contribute to improving access, equity and inclusion in the South African society and economy as long as certain conditions are in place. Section 2.1 has introduced the foundations of the social justice imperative for education and the potential role of microcredentials in opening access, equity and inclusion. However, much empirical work needs to be done on a case-by-case basis to better understand the link between microcredentials and quality employment outcomes.

2.3.3 What are the predominant challenges and enablers affecting the implementation, impact and long-term sustainability of microcredentials?

2.3.3.1 Challenges and enablers

Microcredentials have been applied in a range of institutional settings and for various purposes in different industry environments. Depending on their institutional role and stated intention for a microcredential, stakeholders may express different criteria - or emphasise different criteria - to apply in assessing whether microcredentials meet their educational and vocational objectives. Concurrently, there is no unified accepted definition of microcredentials at a general level, and microcredentials are produced for different purposes. At the same time, it is acknowledged that there are many purposes for which microcredentials are developed including those that are not explicitly designed to advance further vocational or occupational learning or to improve employment chances.

A key labour market question is whether the holder will find access to employment specifically related to the skills, knowledge and competencies addressed in the microcredential. This is an important condition, because sizeable proportions of microcredentials are designed to develop general 'employability skills' and are not explicitly related to a specific occupation. It is more challenging to measure the impact of soft skills in the workplace, which needs more qualitative measures.

In South Africa, implementation of microcredentials is evident in private sector banking, digital and business services industries and also medical service provision. These industry domains are strongly informed by the global diffusion of technology-driven advances and the use of multilateral standards such as in engineering and accounting as professional occupational groups that have appropriated microcredentials as a vehicle of skilling.

As a middle-income country, South Africa has two prominent features that influence take-up of microcredentials: inequitable access online, where microcredentials are predominantly hosted; and very high levels of unemployment, that particularly affects high proportions of marginalised black youth for whom financial inclusion in digital learning is compromised. However, the high penetration of mobile phone ownership in South Africa presents a technology platform to deliver microcredential programmes that could also expand access to individuals in remote rural areas. Yet the current high cost of data and limited access to signal and bandwidth for online learning purposes remain a challenge. If a microcredential programme requires a high degree of self-direction and proficiency in digital environments, this could lead to high non-completion rates, which would counter their aim.

Circumstances advantageous to the sustainability of microcredentials include the advanced development of the country's NQF which can support crowding new qualifications onto the system to make visible the interlinking pathways between credentials. Further, government advocacy for microcredentials is evident through creation of the National Pathways Management Network (NPMN) which links youth to learning and employment opportunities through linked online platforms.

2.3.3.2 Long-term sustainability

There are concerns about the potential for cost barriers to impact on microcredential access in South Africa. As one input factor, price is weighed against the level of confidence of a prospective student in the likelihood that a microcredential programme they are considering will increase their chances of employment. At the same time, South Africa's economy is struggling with high unemployment and slow economic growth which may contribute to the reluctance of low-income

> ***There seems to be potential for microcredentials to contribute to improving access, equity and inclusion in the South African society and economy as long as certain conditions are in place.***

earners to invest in skills that they perceive to offer unknown guarantees/assurances of employment. This is why confidence in microcredentials is an important element in the labour market.

Opportunities to obtain degrees from accredited universities and college are still highly valued in communities and reinforced by government financial support for formal higher education enrolment through the National Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Microcredentials are likely to face limited acceptance if they are perceived as inferior to more established traditional routes into employment. On this issue, a government subsidy for identified microcredentials with solid employment potential could prove pivotal in the future.

Lack of data and research findings remains a substantial challenge for organisations in the private and public sectors to make empirically grounded and well-founded decisions on 'what works' for implementing microcredential programmes that can also show prospects of being sustainable. This is a complex challenge highlighted in a recent OECD (2023) document that assessed research in mainly high-income countries. In North America, Xu et al. (2023) also observe how information on the employment impact of growing numbers of non-credit workforce training programmes remarking 'We know next to nothing about them.' A dearth of information and lack of confidence about how well microcredentials are performing needs to be turned around.

2.4 MICROCREDENTIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

2.4.1 How is quality assurance managed for microcredentials, and what progress has been made toward institutional and national standards in South Africa?

2.4.1.1 Internal and external quality assurance

Although South Africa does not have a policy position on microcredentials, national approaches to quality assurance are well-developed and supported by an enabling policy environment. The approach adopted to quality assurance for microcredentials, whether the same as the model used now, a 'lighter touch' or 'completely decentralised', is relevant. Particularly regarding short learning experiences, SAQA, the CHE, the QCTO and HEI providers have developed substantive and considerable guidelines and frameworks. In addition, it is assumed that the SETAs would also have such documentation although this was not reviewed during the development of this report. Alignment, coordination and coherence have to be carefully considered and enabled, not only through stakeholder engagement but through a firm understanding of documents guiding the governance arrangements related to the qualifications framework and system. Moreover, attention should be paid to what is known about existing opportunities and challenges in related processes.

Quality assurance of education and training is undertaken, in the main, by the three statutory QCs in South Africa:

- Umalusi, the Council for General and Further Education and Training, is responsible for qualifications at levels 1-4 of the NQF, and specifically those that are used in schools and in adult basic education. These qualifications and NQF levels constitute the General and Further Education and Training Sub-Framework (GENFETQSF) of the NQF. Undoubtedly the most well-known qualification that Umalusi is responsible for is the National Senior Certificate, otherwise known as matric.
- The CHE manages the HEQSF, representing levels 5-10 on the NQF. In the main, the CHE is responsible for quality assurance of HEIs, primarily the universities. The CHE monitors programme quality at institutions and accredits institutions to offer qualifications on the HEQSF.

- Finally, the QCTO is responsible for vocational and occupational training represented on the OQSF which runs from level 1-8 of the NQF. While this sub-framework straddles both the GENFETQSF and the HEQSF, the type of training represented by these qualifications is focused on the labour market. Moreover, the Skills Development Amendment Act 37 of 2008 (26H [b]) describes occupational qualifications as intended to be deployed 'in and for the workplace'.

While the three sub-frameworks of the NQF provide for the education and training needs of different sectors of the population and the labour market, a common thread runs through the operations of the QCs in that there is no direct institutional accreditation; rather, education or training providers are accredited to deliver certain programmes. This distinction is important as it allows for a degree of dynamism in the qualifications and qualification types that various education and training providers can offer. Instead of an institution being accredited as an entity, the accreditation process across all three NQF sub-frameworks focuses on specific programmes and the ability of the providers to deliver those programmes at the required standard (CHE 2023; QCTO 2021; Umalusi 2014). While this system at a macro-level suggests that all three sub-frameworks are equally amenable to the possibility of microcredentials, a detailed analysis of each sub-framework shows variable levels of potential.

The GENFETQSF is a sub-framework that sees very little in terms of the development of new qualifications (Umalusi 2014) as it is mainly concerned with schooling. A national school system inevitably focuses on stability and qualifications that are few in number that take many years to complete because they are aimed at providing fundamental basic education and the general and further education required for further study. The DBE has announced that it is interested in reworking the schooling system through a 'streamed' approach (DBE n.d.), and the envisioned Occupational and Vocational stream may be an ideal entry point for microcredentials and shorter training appropriate for the GENFETQSF. While PoMiSA is not focused on basic education, a large proportion of the unemployed population is not in a position to access short learning experiences due to their existing educational attainment as well as resources. Policy makers thus have to remain mindful about point of access and articulation of all individuals, even though PSET generally and HE in particular assume existing qualification levels upon entry.

The HEQSF, in contrast, has a large number of qualifications that run the gamut of undergraduate programmes of first entry into higher education, right through to Master's and PhD degrees at levels 9 and 10 of the NQF. Since the university sector is concerned with higher learning from levels 5 to 10 of the NQF, naturally the programme offerings are diverse and multifarious in nature. While conceptually this allows for great freedom within the university space to offer a variety of programmes, the programme and qualification mix (PQM) (DHET 2016) of each institution must be agreed to by the Minister. While currently the PQM is intended to manage the programme mix of qualifications and programmes that are registered on the NQF, allowing for the flexible deployment of non-accredited short courses which do not fall within the ambit of the current PQM and recognition of microcredentials on the NQF has the potential to limit flexibility of universities if the PQM does not treat these new types of qualifications with the requisite flexibility. Moreover, HEIs offer a range of short learning experiences that are not accredited by the CHE, some of which could be accredited if the learner proceeds to a formal qualification and which have been developed as such.

Finally, the OQSF mirrors the diversity of the HEQSF, while focusing on qualifications that are vocational in nature. Because of this focus on the workplace, the OQSF must respond dynamically to the needs of industry and the labour market, which creates an

environment in need of thoroughgoing flexibility of training (Berezovska et al. 2020). This mandate to meet the needs of employers means that while the OQSF is populated by multi-year, full qualifications, it already plays host to microcredentials in the form of skills programmes. This form of short learning experience was introduced by the QCTO in response to the need of employers for upskilling, reskilling or even the initial short training of employees as well as to create units of employability to allow for the possibility of gaining employment even through short training courses (QCTO n.d.). The QCTO follows a model of harvesting modules from larger qualifications and packaging these short courses as skills programmes, allowing for the easy application of the mechanism of CAT to integrate the short learning experiences into the larger qualifications.

Thus, it can be seen that platforms, processes and short learning experiences that resonate with integrating microcredentials are a feature of the South African qualification system. However, while both the higher education TVET sectors are already engaging with short learning experiences, processes relevant to the HEQSF and OQSF that ensure their articulation into defined learning pathways, particularly across the PSET sector, are not well defined. Moreover, where short learning experiences are non-formal, they are not aligned with NQF levels or articulation into existing qualifications and the quality assurance processes could be inconsistently applied. Generally, the quality assurance processes would need to be augmented if short learning experiences are to be consistently recognised and find articulation in flexible and agile ways into formal learning experiences. While the PSET system in South Africa has the foundation and building blocks to integrate microcredentials, retaining the flexibility, an anticipated benefit and attraction of microcredentials, while regulating and maintaining consistent quality, will require careful and considerate planning, collaboration and resources across the qualification ecosystem.

2.4.2 To what extent are microcredentials integrated into national and regional qualifications frameworks, and what are the challenges and opportunities in this process?

2.4.2.1 National and regional qualifications frameworks and portability

Learning that occurs outside the formal learning and qualifications system is not well understood, made visible or appropriately valued. Yet, it is of critical importance to the full development of individuals and the future of the country. Stakeholders need to work towards the recognition of all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal, and both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing) and investigate the imperative for microcredentials in the South African context.

Nonetheless, there is an acknowledgement of the need for a broader system of qualifications and credentials for lifelong learning in South Africa. However, the current policy environment is not completely responsive to emerging needs of recognition of learning and microcredentials and needs to adapt to the changing landscape/qualification system. For example, national policies on articulation, RPL, CAT and the registration of qualifications and part-qualifications on the NQF, amongst others, are currently silent on the concept of microcredentials and recognising learning which is outside the NQF. Policies and guidelines regulating and providing for short learning experiences should be revisited to give expression to these considerations across all sub-frameworks (schooling, TVET, and higher education) and beyond the scope of the NQF. When such revisiting is done, alignment and coherence are key to the considerations and revisions that will be made. A comprehensive and aligned CAT system, for example, would be a crucial development.

While there is no established policy enabler for the recognition of learning outside the NQF, the DHET is committed to reaching an agreement within the PSET system and amongst the NQF family and stakeholders to recognise

learning outside formal qualifications and part-qualifications and establish an enabling policy environment for microcredentials.

The DHET issued a position paper *Towards Recognition of Learning - The Imperative for Microcredentials* in 2022, where it recommended that under the leadership of SAQA, the DHET should be advised on the recognition of learning in a lifelong learning context and develop a Policy Position and Roadmap of Actions. The paper also recommended that extensive stakeholder consultation takes place and the draft Policy Position and Roadmap of Actions be published for public comment before finalisation.

It can be argued that part-qualifications that are part of the NQF can be equated to microcredentials. That unit standards, defined as part-qualifications registered on the NQF developed under the SAQA Act 58 of 1995, are no longer valid and only remain valid until they are replaced or reach the end of their registration period gives weight to the argument of whether there is a place for microcredentials on the NQF. The DHET is of the view that microcredentials (if part-qualifications) are already registered on the NQF, but smaller units of learning not leading to a qualification and more non-formal and informal learning credentials need to be recognised as non-NQF credentials if they do not follow the same robust quality assurance processes.

As outlined above, the steps envisaged within the South African context are:

1. Conduct extensive stakeholder consultation on the concept, need and format of microcredentials; the state of play process underway may contribute usefully here.
2. Form a core task team to advise the DHET on the recognition of learning in a lifelong learning context.
3. Develop a draft Policy Position and Roadmap of Actions.
4. Conduct extensive stakeholder consultations.
5. Finalise the draft Policy Position and Roadmap of Actions and publish it for public comments before finalising it. This process will include the socio-economic impact assessment study (SEIAS) to be certified by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME).
6. Draft the Policy Framework on Microcredentials and follow the parliamentary processes for drafting policy. This includes wide public consultation and comments.
7. After the policy has been published, conduct extensive advocacy and communication on the policy and its implementation. Take account of transition and grandfathering considerations for any achievements before regulation.

Research should also contribute as appropriate to the quality of the above processes, particularly regarding the relationship between RPL, CAT, existing short learning modalities and employability.

> ***Although South Africa does not have a policy position on microcredentials, national approaches to quality assurance are well-developed and supported by an enabling policy environment.***

CHAPTER 3

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This state of play report is oriented towards the current goal of setting out the context and identifying the opportunities, gaps and priorities as a precursor to phases involving further consultation with relevant stakeholders, followed by harmonisation of the policy environment, and then detailed implementation of specifics including operational planning and execution. This process might be overseen by a designated working group or task force to operationalise recommendations after the policy document is finalised.

In Chapter 1 of this report, the South African context of microcredentials was explored tin terms of the country's challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality while pointing out education as a viable pathway for positive outcomes. Due to a social justice mandate promoting access, equity and inclusivity, microcredentials emerge as a promising route, and the exploration included understanding the role of microcredentials within lifelong learning, in meeting industry needs through reskilling and upskilling, and fitting into the current and evolving qualifications frameworks in the face of global digital transformation and economic changes. In addition, the chapter incorporated a detailed look at South Africa's demographics and employment landscape, highlighting issues like high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, and how different industries have experienced changes in employment levels between 2023 and 2024. The chapter concluded that the potential for microcredentials to enhance South Africa's education and training landscape through building on existing frameworks will depend on if and how short learning experiences address skills mismatches in the labour market, contribute to improved skills anticipation and provide sector-specific, responsive training solutions. Should these benefits of microcredentials be harnessed, they could potentially strengthen the country's capacity to meet future educational, training and workforce challenges.

The second chapter on microcredential conceptualisation analysed the potential adoption of UNESCO's (2022) definition of microcredentials within the South African educational context and the implications thereof. It highlighted existing initiatives and frameworks that align with UNESCO's standards, including the capability of the South African qualifications framework to integrate microcredentials. However, there are challenges related to recognising trusted providers, ensuring that short learning experiences contribute to or complement accredited qualifications, and meeting quality assurance standards. The chapter also discussed discrepancies in the qualifications framework regarding trusted providers and the accreditation of short learning experiences.

Chapter three goes on to present the policy considerations in light of the findings detailed in Chapters 1 and 2.

3.2 POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The broader context within which this analysis of microcredentials takes place is of a country with high unemployment rates. South Africa has to address significant unemployment challenges that are particularly apparent among youth populations. This economic and social development concern is reinforced by generally high levels of poverty and inequality. Consequently, from an education and training perspective, appropriate means must be sought to generate conditions for education and training pathways into employment that are inclusive of economically marginalised people.

At the same time, South Africa, as elsewhere on the globe, is influenced by change and advancements in technology in the social context and also in workplaces. This period of rapid digital transformation presents options for improving the efficiency of systems of production of goods and services, which impacts on and changes the skills needed in workplaces. Workers need to learn different ways of working, and new skills are part of

changed learning requirements. As a result, there are rising needs for upskilling and reskilling workers to suit changes in workplace demands. Microcredentials play a critical role in this process, but these forms of accreditation need to be aligned with reference to and within current national qualifications frameworks.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Develop targeted microcredential programmes aimed at equipping youth with relevant occupational skills and core interpersonal skills to make them more employable.
2. Foster partnerships between education and training institutions and employer bodies to negotiate curriculum and skills relevance of microcredentials to the workplace.
3. Implement microcredential based digital literacy programmes to prepare unemployed youth and marginalised communities for technological advancements.
4. Establish monitoring guidelines for evaluating the viability of defined educational pathways augmented with microcredentials

3.3 MICROCREDENTIAL CONCEPTUALISATION

The experience from South Africa is that the evolution of microcredentials presents a great variety of forms with reference to their levels, subject matter, occupational category, fit into industry processes, mode of teaching and learning, assumptions regarding learning prerequisites and integration within a learning pathway.

In spite of various initiatives internationally, the movements toward acceptance of microcredentials in education and training and the labour market have not benefited from unilateral acceptance of an agreed microcredential definition and taxonomy of microcredentials. This ongoing situation has proved extremely disruptive at meso- and national levels and counterproductive even at local labour market levels of hiring and fair contracting of work-seekers. While there are standards put forward by UNESCO, amid international debates, the matter remains intractable. As a consequence, there is a trust and confidence gap among stakeholders with respect to the recognition of microcredentials, quality assurance standards, and the status of CAT mechanisms for the integration of skills captured by microcredentials into the formal qualifications framework. Consequently, there is limited acceptance of the legitimacy of microcredentials available in the training market and subdued trust of providers.

CONSIDERATIONS

5. Design a process for relevant South African stakeholders to participate in developing a taxonomy for microcredentials to facilitate shared recognition by all stakeholders.
6. Develop a guideline for quality assurance of microcredential programmes.
7. Develop clear standards and accreditation processes for microcredential programmes.
8. Design CAT systems to support integration of microcredentials into the formal qualifications framework across institutions.

3.4 COLLABORATION BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR MICROCREDENTIAL PROVIDERS

South Africa is fortunate to have a diverse provider landscape that extends across the private and public sectors and includes private sector providers which serve employer needs for occupation specific training, for instance, by developing bespoke in-house programmes, and which offer microcredential opportunities in the open education and training market. Private sector providers also collaborate with higher education providers in educator continuing professional development programmes. Higher education providers also offer microcredential programmes that cater for non-formal adult learning and also for professional development programmes in industry. Further, local and national NGO providers, sometimes in collaboration with multilateral agencies, offer programmes for unemployed workers and unemployed youth. Private education providers have also begun to offer programmes that focus on soft skills and work readiness for youth.

In this mix are also microcredentials that are offered via global microcredential providers, where the credentials are linked to technical programmes such as Microsoft and Google programmes. At the national level, government agencies such as the SETAs, whose primary function is to incentivise employers to train their workers, are empowered to fund microcredential programmes offered by NGOs to provide unemployed youth with occupational and entrepreneurial skills. Many of these initiatives focus on generating opportunities for unemployed youth and are conducted to support youth, though the microcredential programmes in most cases are informal and not formally recognised.

These examples reflect how microcredentials may be quite varied and range across informal, non-formal and formal learning options and serve the purposes of supporting workforce/employment entry, self-employment, upskilling and reskilling, transitions between occupational paths, and professional development. They also contribute to skills development and addressing skills gaps and skills shortages in different industrial sectors.

CONSIDERATIONS

9. Diversify microcredential programme offerings in the training market by encouraging collaboration between public and private sector agencies which design, develop and implement microcredentials and employers.
10. Partner with the relevant government and employer bodies to find ways of enhancing the recognition of microcredentials within the SETA funding environment.
11. The relevant industry and government role players should collaborate towards development of microcredential programmes in identified sectors with potential for strong demand in defined occupational groups.

3.5 MICROCREDENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Broadly, the implementation and effectiveness of microcredentials will be impacted by the levels of adoption by employers within an industry sector, which currently is difficult to judge but for which metrics may be developed in the future. Nevertheless, the general observation is that industries differ in their response to microcredentials in South Africa. Further analysis may be useful to understand the rationale for why industries are more or less likely to recognise and appreciate the value that microcredentials bring to their bottom line.

Equally important is to establish from the industry perspective what criteria employers

would prioritise for assessing whether a microcredential is meeting their skills training and performance objectives.

Then, with particular reference to microcredentials that are designed to support economically marginalised populations to access employment, social mobility and socio-economic impacts measures need to be employed. This means that data collection and analysis must incorporate the levels of access and the social and economic impacts of microcredentials on equity. In the long term, it would be valuable to consider what would need to be incorporated into a comprehensive evaluation of a microcredential.

Interest in sustainability of microcredentials is related to the coordination between skills demands in the labour market and coordination with microcredential availability. This could be better timed in concert with decision-making on economic sectoral and trade policy, from which microcredential needs could be predicted. On the other hand, some microcredentials may have a short 'shelf life', quickly becoming redundant because of rapid technological and workplace systems advancements.

CONSIDERATIONS

12. Establish clear criteria for evaluating the success of microcredential programmes.
13. Conduct impact assessments with reference to access and socio-economic equity.
14. Promote best practices in implementing sustainable microcredential programmes.
15. Develop information management systems that can track employment outcomes related to microcredential learning.

3.6 FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The following aspects relevant to enriching the policy environment for better sustainability of microcredentials in South Africa may also be considered.

CONSIDERATIONS

16. Initiate a process to seamlessly integrate microcredentials into the NQF.
17. Ensure continuity of stakeholder participation in constructing relationships in the governance of the national microcredential space.
18. Provide policy support for the flexible recognition of learning - formal, non-formal and informal – to improve accessibility across diverse learning pathways.
19. Sustain committed participation in regional policy framework development that works towards incorporation of microcredentials.
20. Place a strong emphasis on suitable data collection points in microcredential programmes that enable better supply of trustworthy data that can give confidence for decision making among developers, providers and users of microcredentials.

3.7 CONCLUDING NOTE

This report has attempted to map out the path towards a country-specific framework for the systematic inclusion of microcredentials in South Africa. It is evident from the report that a process such as this will need to be conceptualised in a phased manner to allow the national legislation and policy frameworks, including the NQF, to adapt. A national collaborative process will be required and will hopefully be initiated through the work of PoMiSA in 2025.

What cannot be disputed is that microcredentials are being integrated into NQFs globally. South Africa has a well-established qualifications system that is well positioned to provide a basis for the work ahead. Care will have to be taken to protect the integrity of the current system while being agile enough to move towards a more inclusive approach.

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