

POLICY BRIEF

Microcredentials in the Nordic region

**An investigation
of the occurrence
and proliferation of
microcredentials in the
Nordic countries and
self-governing areas**



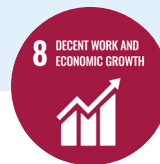
Nordic Network for
Lifelong Learning

THE PROJECT IS DEFINED AS:

An investigation of small learning units that can be defined as *microcredentials* (hereafter MCs) following the definition offered by the European Union. The study has also included small learning units that have not formally been described as MCs.

The overall purpose of the study has been to get a deeper insight into the understanding of MCs in Nordic learning landscapes.

The mapping has been carried out as a qualitative study, analysing the occurrence of small learning experiences, with a focus on various aspects and characteristics of the learning experiences. The study has, thus, not been carried out with the intention of delivering statistical evidence of the occurrence of MCs. The term MC has been applied throughout the investigation, both in cases where it is and is not formally used.



MCs – a response to major changes in society

When it comes to future global challenges, the Nordic countries face similar challenges such as securing inclusive societies, global competitiveness of labour markets and adapting to the situation of changes derived from megatrends. Megatrends such as demographic imbalances, shortage of skilled workforce, implications of climate changes and the requirements of the Twin Transition – the digital and the green transition – call for responses that, in several ways,

exceed previous learning models. Not least because changes are occurring at a speed never experienced before.

The Nordic Vision 2030 highlights measures for securing a sustainable Nordic region. More specifically, **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. Quality education, SDG 8. Decent jobs and economic growth** and **SDG 11. Sustainable cities and communities** have been of particular relevance to this study. Inspired by the

spread and rapid increase of MCs worldwide, but with a particular attention towards the MC initiative by the EU, the investigation of microcredentials in a Nordic perspective undertaken by the Nordic Network for Lifelong Learning (NLL) has been carried out with the aim of identifying and assessing *if and how* this growing worldwide trend is also becoming a trend in the five countries and three self-governing areas in the Nordic region.

The added value of MCs and the benefits for end-users

The investigation shows that learning in the Nordic region takes place within an array of diverse learning formats, aims, purposes, target groups, contexts and learning approaches.

In general, within the area of investigation, the provision of formal education is characterised by a high level of accessibility (with the exemption of areas with a low number of populations),

as it is funded by national or municipal bodies, has low fees for participants and has the involvement of social partners for development and maintenance of education programmes.

However, in some respects, these coherent models for provision of skills development, upskilling and reskilling are no longer the only answer to fast changing needs for competence development and learning.

Criticism is raised towards issues of responsiveness, timeliness and flexibility.

With the occurrence of MCs, as defined by the EU initiative, small learning units are spreading in countries across the world, as a new format. Many questions call for further consideration and decision making regarding the future positioning of MCs in the learning landscape.

CONCLUSION

From a Nordic perspective, MCs are not yet part of the formal national education systems. However, the mapping provided by NLL shows that different and diverse types of and contexts for learning exist in the Nordic region. These results illustrate that a strong tradition of learning exists across the Nordic region as a whole – a tradition of learning that places emphasis on the learner. Considering the recent proliferation and development of MCs, and the interest the concept has gained, it is possible that a framework build around MCs could form a more systematic, consistent and targeted application of the diversity of learning forms and learning experiences – mapped and described in this Investigation – that are currently found in the Nordic region. A more systematic framework for MCs could provide a new format for responsive, timely and flexible learning. This would create added value and heighten the benefits for the learner and for all "end-users" involved in learning.

The placement of MCs in formal learning landscapes calls for the consideration of *how* MCs, as a complementary way of valuing learning, should be designed and developed

to allow individuals to collect and to stack learning experiences in a flexible way, at their own pace, and throughout the course of life. Such considerations, in turn, call for an understanding of formal qualifications and MCs as being complementary – constituting a more dynamic and inclusive landscape of learning, accommodating diverse learning styles and prerequisites.

To reach this dynamic system of qualification and learning options, the use of MCs should be flexible in order to accommodate individual learning pathways with options of stacking learning credentials to full qualifications, while standards for Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are developed for these requirements.

Considering formal qualification systems and a flexible system for MCs as parallel, permeable structures, not fully integrated but connected by providing doors that can open in both directions, these two co-existing structures could generate mutual benefits as well as support and nourish the lifelong learning of the individual.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the investigation presented in the report, the following recommendations, addressing five levels or stakeholders, are important for the further process of developing a systematic framework for the use of MCs in the Nordic region.

1 THE LEARNER

- Choose a MC that align with your carrier aspirations and skills gaps
- Seek information and guidance relevant for the process of your choice
- Consider the area of recognition of your achieved learning outcomes of the MC
- Pay special attention to the question of validation of prior learning, to have your prior learning recognised as part of the MC

2 THE PROVIDER IN COLLABORATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- Make sure that information is available for learners and employers to know exactly which learning outcomes and benefits they can expect from the chosen MC
- Distinguish among benefits as professional skills aimed at specific jobs and tasks, personal development, inclusion in the labour market, admission to education as well as job, job retention and recruitment
- Ensure that each MC addresses a distinct skill or competency
- Develop rigorous assessment criteria to ensure that the learner meets the desired competences
- Collaborate with industry partners to identify in-demand skills
- Provide evidence of added value and benefits for end-users and establish a standard procedure for systematic and regular follow-up on expected outcomes of provided MCs

3 SOCIAL PARTNERS

- To develop sustainable MCs, skills needs and requirements should be surveyed at various levels: company, local companies, branch, sector, society
- For the characteristics of MCs, it should be discussed and made visible what determines the added value of MCs
- A systematic and regularly follow up on added value of MCs and achieved benefits should be carried out within a stakeholder collaboration

4 SOCIETY

- Develop MCs that support the inclusion of an individual into society with a particular attention towards an increased number of individuals feeling left outside of communities
- Social innovation with MCs should be encouraged by experimenting and bridging learning and social activities

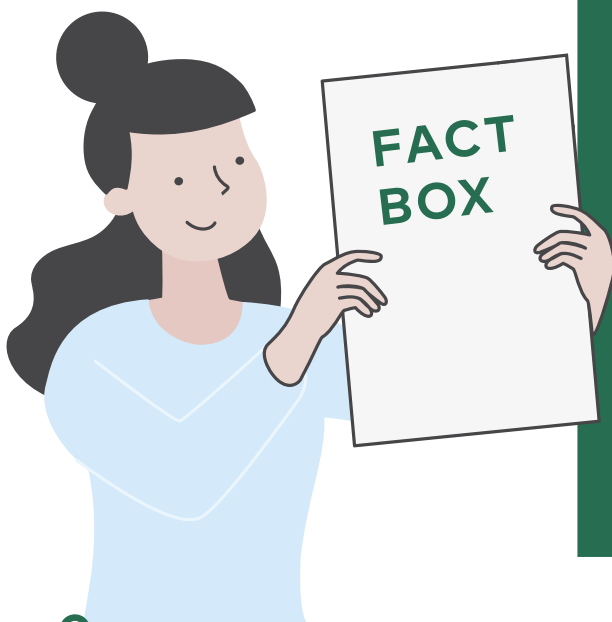
5 POLICY MAKERS

- The term MCs should be defined in order to clarify what is meant by MCs, what are their characteristics and potentials
- Policy makers should initiate a discussion on how the relations between MCs and formal education could be established
- Policy makers should make decisions about development and provision of a digital infrastructure for storing of MCs obtained by learners
- Requirements for the development of MCs should be addressed, by simultaneously highlighting the potentials of providing a complementary way of valuing learning

The idea behind addressing different levels, individually and jointly, is based on the understanding that in order to secure legitimacy, trust and transparency – to mention just some of the decisive requirements to be fulfilled – decisions about the use and placement of MCs in the general learning landscapes must be considered and made in accordance with various stakeholders, levels of interests and requirements.

The investigation of microcredentials in a Nordic perspective has been carried out by the NLL Expert network on validation. The study was financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The Policy Brief is based on the findings presented in the report *Microcredentials in a Nordic perspective*.



The NLL study has been informed and inspired by:

- The Nordic Vision 2030
- OECD, Research project on Micro-credentials: Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability, Uses and Possibilities
- OECD, Research project on Micro-credentials: Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability, Public Policies for Lifelong Learning and Employability
- Cedefop, Research project, Microcredentials for Labour Market Education and Training
- EU Commission, European Councils Recommendation on Microcredentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability (June 2022)
- NOVA Nordic project (2023)