

Review. Federighi, P., Torlone, F., Bjerkaker, S. (2025). *Understanding micro-credentials in non-formal adult learning and education: Making learning visible*. Kompetanseforbundet.

---

What kind of learning do we want to promote in a time marked by the tension between instant certification and the quality of the learning achieved? Can education really be reduced to something “like a product at your daily shopping: ‘Best before...’” (p. 9), or does it remain – even in the age of micro-credentials – a transformative practice of the self? It is with this reflection on the ontological stakes of education, in a rapidly changing world, that the report *Understanding Micro-Credentials in Non-Formal Adult Learning and Education: Making Learning Visible*, edited by Paolo Federighi, Francesca Torlone and Sturla Bjerkaker, opens.

The report is the result of the collaboration between the Norwegian Kompetanseforbundet and the University of Florence within an Erasmus+ small-scale partnership project. Based on a documentary and comparative analysis, “This report aims to understand the meaning and the various options related to the adoption of a micro-credential system that addresses the demand for competence development through non-formal adult learning and education (ALE)” (p. 7), with a specific focus on quality, recognition policies and integration into national qualification systems.

In this context, the report identifies the presence of a “de facto system”, that is, a system that already exists and operates independently of national regulatory frameworks. Micro-credentials are not a future hypothesis: they are already widely disseminated and developed by a plurality of public and private actors working in the field of non-formal education, often in the absence of shared standards.

What are micro-credentials, and what distinguishes them? In addition to exploring the range of terms currently in use – micro-competences, micro-qualifications, micro-certificates, nanodegrees, micro-diplomas – the authors propose an operational definition built around three main components. Drawing on the European Recommendation, they recall that “ ‘Micro-credentials’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning” and that “the three fundamental components of both definitions consist of the release of a ‘record’, which makes the learning outcomes achieved by the learner transparent, ‘following a small volume of learning’ ” (p. 17).

The historical overview in the report shows that the use of short learning units can already be traced back to British military training after the First World War. Today, micro-credentials are rooted in transformations of work, digitalisation processes and the need for upskilling and reskilling. Among the best-known online providers are platforms such as Coursera, edX, FutureLearn and Udacity. The global reach of these providers illustrates how the “de facto system” of micro-credentials is already active and widespread, well beyond the boundaries of national regulatory frameworks.

From the comparative analysis of the two countries considered, the authors describe, in Norway, a strategy based on “competence certificates” that are firmly anchored in the productive context, whereas in Italy they observe a plurality of often fragmented initiatives, only partially integrated into public policies.

What might be the advantages and risks of a micro-credential management model grounded

in a quality-assurance system? On the one hand, the report highlights the increase in the supply of qualified jobs, the expansion of the adult learning offer, the personalisation of pathways, the possibility of certifying transversal competences and life skills, and the improvement of learning conditions. On the other hand, it points to the risk of “credentialism”, that is, an excessive proliferation of certificates that risk becoming selective tools and further widening existing educational inequalities. If not properly regulated, “for human resources professionals, credentialism can present several challenges, including narrowing the talent pool of candidates, creating difficulties in hiring and promoting workers, and potentially leading to discrimination against workers without formal credentials” (p. 26).

However, as other studies cited by the authors also suggest, participation does not automatically match the achievement of learning outcomes. The report therefore emphasises the importance of adopting a system for the use of micro-credentials that can ensure quality, traceability and consistency with the real needs of learners, rather than merely multiplying the offer.

The fourth section of the report goes to the heart of quality standards, validation of learning outcomes, certification criteria, labour market relevance and the recognisability of micro-credentials. It presents a taxonomy of scenarios and components that can become a valuable operational tool for policymakers as well as for professionals involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of training programmes. Of particular interest is the “multiple approach” to quality assurance (p. 31), which combines three complementary strategies: a “regulatory approach” based on minimum requirements to be met; an “advisory approach” that draws on guidelines and good practices; and an “organic approach” that gives providers autonomy in defining their own standards.

The report concludes with the observation that “the size of the ‘de facto system’ of micro-credentials is so developed that it cannot be entirely brought under the control of state authorities. It responds to a demand for skills development present in the labour market” (p. 49). Considering this, the authors propose a change of perspective in public policies: rather than taking a merely restrictive stance, they suggest that public authorities take an active role in quality assurance of the provision offered by different providers, to protect both companies and adult learners. In this sense, “their inclusion in a wider National Competence Framework would promote the spread of micro-credentials more oriented toward learning outcomes corresponding to the demand for new skills in the labour market” (p. 49).

This report provides a valuable tool for fostering dialogue between adult education, schools, vocational education and training, and labour market policies. The study is more than a descriptive account. It is a call to action, inviting readers to decide whether and how to integrate micro-credentials into existing systems, without being driven by an obsession with certification, and to rethink the very meaning of educating and training today.

Giulia Biagi

Università degli Studi di Firenze, [giulia.biagi1@unifi.it](mailto:giulia.biagi1@unifi.it)