

Boosting the digital transition through lifelong learning

NORDIC INITIATIVES

Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1

All stakeholders including social partners at transnational, national, regional, and local levels have a shared responsibility. They should actively create and engage in strategic partnerships or networks that can support the development of lifelong learning offers in a public or private context.

It is essential that the lifelong learning offers are flexible and adapted to the changing needs of the labour market. This is best ensured by engaging stakeholders in a dialogue and through a joint need assessment, identifying and sharing relevant offers - as has happened in the COVID-19 crisis (in an online, on-site or blended format) while assuring that the offers are relevant to the stakeholders. In the future, it will be important to produce continuous competence development in increasingly wider-based networks, rather than base the responsibility on a single actor: individuals, businesses, the social partners, higher education institutions, governments. The dialogue produces a more innovative co-created offer.

Recommendation 2

Develop measures that ensure a faster transmission of research-based knowledge throughout society by offering short courses or micro-credentials and opening access to courses that have been accessible only for the full-time degree students.

The Nordic countries and the European Union have in recent decades made major investments in research and the results are coming with increasing speed that is changing the way we live and work. However, there has been too little focus on ensuring a rapid transfer of the new and often revolutionary research results. Knowledge transfer has taken place through different types of joint research projects, but generally without modules for competence development for staff. The knowledge transfer of research findings is still achieved mainly through teaching young students with the assumption that they in the course of time will be able to ensure the transfer of knowledge. In the Nordic context this is now changing through creating strategic partnerships that particularly are focused on supporting SMEs in engaging in the digital transition through targeted continuing education offers (e.g. on AI, robotization, big data, etc.).



Recommendation 3

Ensure that the offers build on the knowledge, skills, and competences that individuals have achieved through formal and non-formal education and throughout their working life.

When initiatives and continuing education offers are developed in partnership (co-creation) between different stakeholders these should aim to support new, innovative, and flexible learning paths. It is too costly for the individuals, the companies, and the taxpayers if continuing education does not build on the total sum of knowledge, skills, and competences that individuals have achieved. To this end, micro-credentials, shorter courses and modules – that can be with credits or have another type of non-formal certification (i.e. badges) – are very relevant and can more easily be adapted to fit different communities of learners. It will be important to use the current digital momentum to ensure a diversity of the offers – online, on-campus, in a blended format – using the experiences for didactic and pedagogical development. Thus, there is a need to develop offers that meet the needs of learners independent of their educational level.

Recommendation 4

Assure that continuing education offers can be very successful if the didactic and pedagogical format includes learning together or in communities of learners online, on-site or in a blended format.

If networks of learners are created either within their own workplace or with learners with different experiences, then the impact of the new skills and competences have a higher potential to benefit not only the individuals, but also their workplace. Learning together has greater value if it involves different groups of employees and management representatives (leadership) from the same company. For instance, the ability and agility to implement AI and digitalisation grow with the number of staff who gains digital competencies. The importance of focusing on up- and reskilling of individuals and acknowledging the benefit of a collective competence lift through peer support and learning goes back to the Nordic tradition of folk high schools. The concept was developed in order to ensure that all parts of society had democratic competencies and skills and an understanding of their own culture. In a broad sense, lifelong learning is about ensuring the continuous competence development, competitiveness, and well-being. It is also about the core values of our societies: access to education, inclusion, democracy, and mitigation of social inequality.



Recommendation 5

Engage actively in the development of digital leaders and transversal competencies for AI-experts, a key priority for companies to be fit for the digital age.

It will be essential for the competitiveness of the Nordic region and the European Union that all citizens become digital natives. The KomDigital project shows that digital leaders, digital frontrunners, and AI-experts play an important role in the transition towards digital public and private sectors. To create digital leadership that builds on the latest research results should be a key priority. The development of AI systems brings a potential for economic growth and social benefit, but also causes concerns about the ethical, legal, and societal risks. AI experts need training programmes to deepen an understanding of ethics and skills for ethical reflection. To develop AI systems in a responsible way, it is not enough to focus only on ethics. AI experts should have the time and space to acquire skills from other social science disciplines, too. Employees are an important raw material, and they will lead the digital revolution and develop the products and services that will benefit all of us. The digital transformation also demands leadership to orchestrate the change. An important success factor for the creation of momentum for change is that the digital transition engages more than one employee together with a management representative. It is essential to develop digital leadership to succeed with the digital transformation.

Recommendation 6

Development of a joint online platform where courses can be made available to different types of learners.

The interviews indicate that it is not so much a lack of relevant educational offers, but that the offers are not always available outside their specific environment and can be very hard to identify by the potential users (individuals and companies). One-stop platforms that include both information and the possibility to apply for a course can facilitate access to information for both individuals and employers. Education is increasingly international or transnational and digital, therefore a Nordic or a European platform would be an important step towards ensuring engagement in continuing education as learners and employers would be able to compare the offers and find the ones that fit their needs.



Recommendation 7

Evaluate and develop the current funding models for continuing education. Models that encourage and motivate both individuals and higher education institutions to engage should be introduced.

To encourage innovative approaches the “seed funding” is essential for creating the strategic partnerships that are the key for developing adaptable and flexible offers appealing for those looking for continuing education, and which supports the digital and green transitions. It is evident that a “seed funding” is important for the development of the partnerships, but it will be equally important to ensure that diverse funding mechanisms are developed to ensure that up- and reskilling will be available at a larger scale. Good examples are the Icelandic Education Funds that focus on ensuring that individuals have the possibility to access lifelong learning (learning account), and the Knowledge Foundation that supports the development of continuing education courses in higher education institutions as part of their research programme funding. The traditional government funding structures for universities do not make it attractive for university staff to engage in the development of continuing education. Core funding for education and research does not typically include funding of engagement with HEIs’ third mission. Different types of education or competence funds are being developed in the Nordic countries prompted by the tripartite negotiations, but typically they are not explicitly targeted for the highly skilled professionals. Changes to the student support system are being introduced, which target individuals who want to upskill or reskill, and COVID-19 can also be expected to drive investment changes for continuing education. The report findings indicate that targeted funding for pilot projects including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has been the key to engage with this group. Larger companies have often developed in-house training, and some have started to provide these for others, as Digital Dogme is an example of.

Recommendation 8

Capitalize on the knowledge from the existing initiatives and further advance the multi-stakeholder co-creation. This could be accomplished through a dedicated network anchored on the political level.

It could be envisaged to mandate the existing Nordic Network for Lifelong Learning, NVL established by the Nordic Council of Ministers to sustain the collected knowledge. This could be accomplished by creating a special meeting space for ICT/STEM experts and other relevant stakeholders to engage in knowledge sharing, getting inspired from each other and turning the best initiatives in the joint Nordic effort. Therefore, the scope of existing thematic networks in NVL should be broadened to have an explicit focus on digital skills for all professional categories and a dedicated network for ICT/STEM professionals.

In cooperation with