

# **Micro-credentials at the Higher Education – Work Interface: From Intercultural Communication to Transnational Communicative Competence**

Niina Kovalainen, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland  
Anne-Mari Raivio, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Finland

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026  
Official Conference Proceedings

## **Abstract**

This article examines micro-credentials as a structural and pedagogical interface between higher education and working life. Situated within a Finnish university of applied sciences (UAS) collaboration project, the study explores how profession-specific employability skills and communicative competences can be recognized, validated and developed via micro-credentials. While intercultural communication competence has traditionally focused on cultural awareness and interaction across contextual differences, contemporary professional environments increasingly require transnational communicative competence: the ability to operate fluidly across linguistic, cultural, institutional and digital boundaries. Drawing on an ongoing UAS cooperation project, this paper presents preliminary findings indicating that cross-sector collaboration is not merely beneficial but essential for designing meaningful micro-credentials that serve as agile, future-oriented modes of skill recognition. Early results from this case study suggest that co-creation with working life partners strengthens relevance, authenticity and transferability of learning outcomes. The analysis integrates principles of transnational communication and andragogy, emphasizing adult learners' experience, self-direction and work-related relevance. From this perspective, micro-credentials are conceptualized not only as modular certifications, but as co-constructed learning processes embedded in professional practice. Recognition and validation of prior and emerging competences, together with up-to-date profession-bound skills, are shown to support not only higher education pathways but also labour market integration and broader societal participation. The paper argues that micro-credentials developed collaboratively with employers and diverse stakeholder groups—including migrants and peer communities—can function as mechanisms of inclusion, competence transparency and ultimately, transnational communicative agency in contemporary Europe.

*Keywords:* transnational communication, micro-credentials, andragogical pedagogy, workplace pedagogy, higher education pedagogy

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

Contemporary work relies heavily on foreign language and intercultural communication skills, whereas, in essence, working-life contexts require transnational communicative competence (Dufva et al., 2026; Kovalainen, 2022). Merely using a foreign language or communicating in a foreign society does not automatically make communication intercultural or transnational (Kovalainen, 2022). The meanings and differences of the afore-mentioned concepts are not understood, which leads to emphasizing incorrect aspects in educational contexts. These two concepts are complementary but not equal. Intercultural communication can be argued to be contextual, whereas transnational communication surpasses contexts and is manifested as communicative competences beyond different types of borders or boundaries, whether they be imposed or personal.

Working life requirements and needs keep changing rapidly due to AI, higher education (HE) financing, and the professions themselves. However important a factor in professional contexts transnational communication competence is, the existing educational and recognition structures do not, and cannot, adequately support its recognition, development, or visibility. For individuals to understand the communication skills they already possess, the skills their (future) profession requires, and to ultimately continue to acquire a more comprehensive communicative competence, new pedagogical and structural solutions are needed. Keeping all of this in mind, one promising solution might be to develop intercultural and transnational communication competences with and through micro-credentials that are andragogically developed in collaboration with working life (cf. Knowles et al., 2005). This kind of approach would enable more profession-specific skills to be honed in an agile manner.

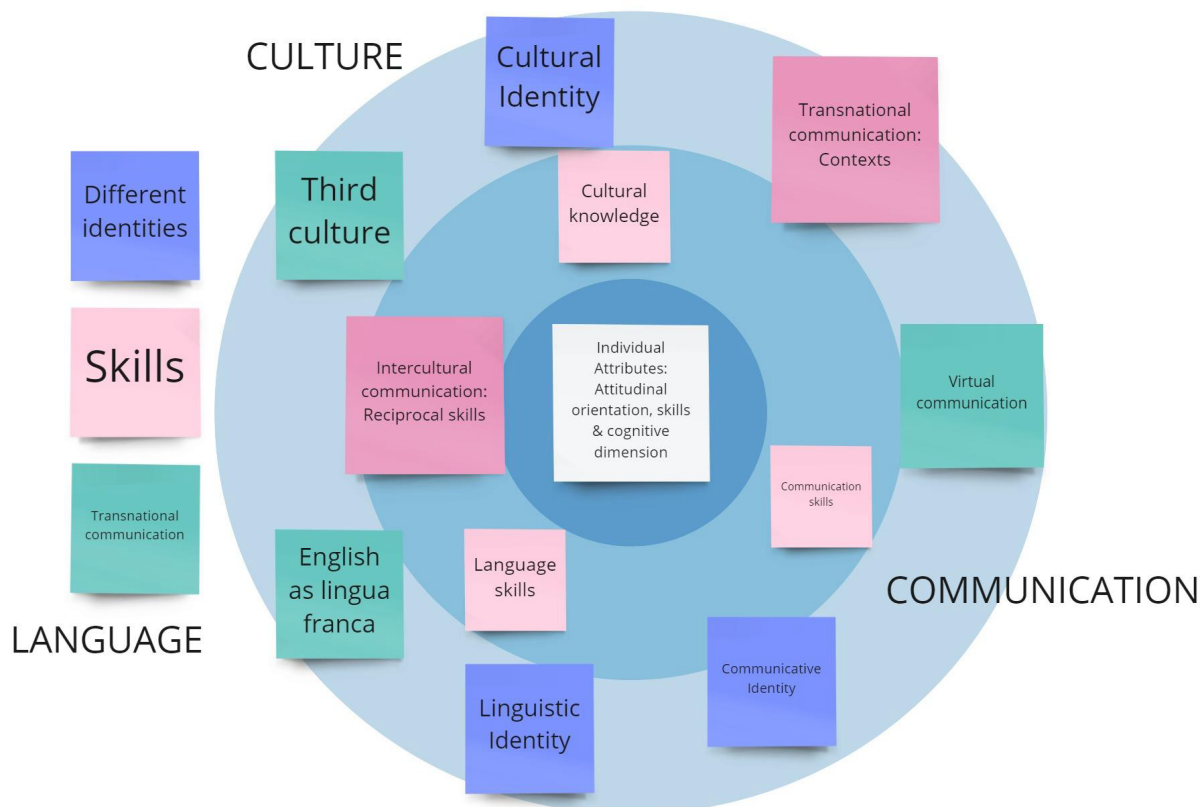
## **Theoretical Framework**

The concepts of intercultural communication and transnational communication are not interchangeable, but complementary and somewhat layered. The perceived skills, knowledge, and ultimately communicative competences are not similar between intercultural communication (ICC) and transnational communication (TNC) (see Figure 1). Intercultural communication competence can be seen as language skills, cultural knowledge, and communication skills that individuals are able to use in a given, specific communication context. Transnational communicative competence in turn extends beyond context-related intercultural communication frameworks by capturing the complexity of communication across overlapping linguistic, cultural, virtual, and even organisational contexts. It also emphasizes understanding individual skills that are transferable from one intercultural communication context to another: knowing how to use a lingua franca, understanding the requirements and challenges of virtual communication, and ultimately, hopefully, being able to build a shared, common third culture (Kovalainen, 2022).

But what makes TNC more demanding is the premise that in order to be competent in TNC, individuals need to understand their own individual communicative attributes and how they are visible in TNC. As individual communicators, we portray our attitudinal orientation, communicative skills as well as our cognitive dimension in any given communication context. This applies to any reciprocal communication context, making it an ICC dimension. However, in TNC, it is not sufficient to acknowledge those aspects, but to be able to distinguish individual components of your communicator identity that may or may not be transferable to other communication contexts.

**Figure 1**

*Transnational Communicative Competence (Kovalainen, 2022)*



*Note.* Adapted from Kovalainen (2022).

Why is this relevant in working-life contexts? While in educational contexts, communication is seldom anything other than short-term, evaluated, individual assignments from rigid syllabi, performed in closed, standardised contexts, working-life contexts are, naturally, completely different. Professional communication contexts require multi-faceted competence that is not easy to anticipate, describe, or illustrate on paper. Skills are not evaluated but appreciated. Needs for different communication skills change rapidly, and it is not necessary or advisable to emphasize language skills, especially English skills, if and when there are other components of communicative competence that are equally or more applicable. Attitudinal orientation is largely unaddressed in education since it is not evaluated, whereas in collaborative working contexts, it is recognised as an important factor. Working-life contexts require communication skills that are transferable, long-term, and collaborative in nature. In other words, working life requires TNC.

### **Workplace Learning and the Visibility of Competence**

If TNC is understood as collaborative and transferable (Kovalainen, 2022), it becomes necessary to examine the learning environments and processes through which such competence is developed. Transnational communicative competence is strongly connected to authentic communicative situations, so it could be argued that a significant part of it is built at work, through participation and often informally. Workplace learning refers to learning that takes place at work and for work (Billett, 2014), and most of it happens outside formal training and education (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Yeo, 2008).

It could be argued that while workplace learning produces transnational communicative competence, it does not automatically produce awareness of that competence. According to Billett (2014), a significant part of workplace learning takes place through participation, observation, listening and sense-making. Ash and Clayton (2004) argue that awareness of one's own learning often remains tacit or is regarded as part of a person's general capability. People know more than they are able to articulate. The same challenge has also been recognised among university students: they have competence, but do not necessarily recognise and articulate it (Strachan, 2016).

How can these experiences and learning then be made visible, recognised and transferable? Workplace learning can easily remain invisible unless there is time and space to consciously stop and reflect on experiences. In the context of learning, reflection can be understood as a process of consciously examining and making sense of experiences, allowing new insights and deeper understanding to emerge (Boud et al., 1994).

Through reflection, experiences can be structured and their meanings deepened (Moon, 2013). In this sense, articulation can then be understood as making visible the understanding constructed through reflection, thereby making competence communicable and, ideally, transferable to new contexts. However, articulation does not mean merely describing experiences. According to Ash and Clayton (2004), the learning process involves describing experiences, analysing them and finally structuring them so that their meaning and applicability can be recognised in future situations. Fyfe et al. (2024) argue that articulation supports agency, identity and the ability to recognise and utilise competence in new situations. Reflection and articulation are therefore not merely ways of reporting experiences, but an essential part of the learning process through which experiences become recognised and transferable competence.

Workplaces are therefore important learning environments, and workplace learning should be regarded as something that can and should be supported and promoted at work. In particular, interaction, collaboration and communication competences can be seen to develop through working life and authentic situations. However, competence developed through work needs support in order to become visible. This requires pedagogical structures that support the visibility, articulation and transferability of competence.

### **Andragogy and Learning Through Experience**

According to the principles of andragogy, an adult learner is self-directed, experiential, goal-oriented and practically oriented. This view on learnership can especially be seen in Knowles' andragogy, where learners are described as active agents who take responsibility for their learning based on previous experiences, wanting to apply learning to their work or life (Knowles et al., 2005). This approach makes it important to approach transnational communication not as cultural know-how, but from the perspectives of adult learners' work experiences, self-reflection and applicable knowledge (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005).

Adult learning approaches emphasise the role of experience and critical reflection in making competences visible (Mezirow, 1991). According to Mezirow's transformative learning theory, learning becomes meaningful when learners critically examine their assumptions, beliefs and ways of acting, thereby reframing their experiences and potentially transforming their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection invites learners to recognise and critically examine their own assumptions, seek meanings behind events, and question and reframe their understanding of what has taken place in a given situation (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Thus,

learning is about accumulating new knowledge as well as reinterpreting previous experiences and ways of understanding.

From this perspective, learning can also be seen as becoming someone who is able to act responsibly and purposefully in the world. According to Biesta (2013), the purpose of education is not only to support the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also to encourage learners to exist and act in the world in a responsible and “grown-up” way.

Approaching transnational communication from the afore-mentioned intertwining perspectives alters the role of a HEI teacher from an information distributor to a facilitator (Knowles 1980). In HEIs, andragogy should shape syllabi planning, teaching methods and evaluation processes as well as criteria (Knowles et al., 2005; Mezirow, 1991). Both teaching and assessment ought to contain some form of peer learning (team assignments), multifaceted reflection, flexible manners of studying, learning by developing (Laurea University of Applied Sciences, 2026), problem-based learning and recognising earlier competences and skills (European Commission, 2024). In transnational and global HEI contexts adult learners need to simultaneously navigate in cultural, linguistic and institutional environments that require intercultural knowledge as well as communicative and digital skills. Transnational communication is not merely a “second phase” of intercultural communication, nor is it the second phase of it, but a multifaceted skill set that develops as a part of professional agency (Kovalainen, 2022). Yet again, these underlying aspects of adults learning transnational communication appear to highlight the agile and appropriate nature of work-based micro-credentials.

In intercultural classrooms, the cultural and professional experiences of adult learners enrich common understanding of the task or issue at hand. It is the andragogical perspective on learning that makes those shared experiences visible as a part of intercultural dialogue. Previous experiences become a learning resource that makes transnational communication visible. What is needed in these types of learning contexts is approachable and multilingual content in synchronous and asynchronous hybrid or virtual learning environments that mimic realistic working life environments. Learners need to be able to practise their intercultural communication skills and to be challenged sufficiently to start developing their transnational communication skills from one communication context to another.

These aspects of transnational communication in professional contexts also became the topics of the micro-credentials carried out in the pilot study described in this article. The synthesis of andragogical perspectives on learning and transnational communication supports the view that micro-credentials are not a simple “signal” of learning but more a structure of making learned skills and know-how visible (see also Knowles et al., 2005; Kovalainen, 2022; Mezirow, 1991). The micro-credential skills demonstration context, by nature, does not merely offer an opportunity to demonstrate your skills, but also to learn from others and about yourself. According to Lewis and Bryan (2021), andragogical approaches are well suited to simulation tasks, case work, debates, critical incidents and flipped classroom in teaching nursing students. Active learning, thinking, listening and asking questions are crucial in acquiring skills in demanding working environments that require critical thinking, self-reflection and problem-solving (Lewis & Bryan, 2021). It can be argued that not all students would benefit from approaching learning from these perspectives.

## **Micro-credentials as Emerging Structures**

How can we bring into teaching the competence that is currently required or valued in working life at a given moment? How can we teach profession-specific features quickly and flexibly? The answer to both questions is the same: we could make use of the opportunities offered by micro-credentials (European Commission, 2024). A micro-credential can be either 1) the verification of existing competence in a performance situation designed and assessed by teaching professionals, or 2) a short learning module focused on a very narrow topic, with competence verified at the end of the module. Performance situations for existing skills are usually concise and short, lasting from a few hours to a day, whereas the duration of learning modules has, at a general level, still been defined across a very broad scale (see also European Commission, 2024).

Higher education institutions can play an important role not only as providers of new learning opportunities, but also as supporters of recognising, articulating, transferring and further developing competence acquired through work and experience. Micro-credentials at the interface between working life and higher education can provide a pedagogical structure for reflection, articulation and the recognition of competence.

### **Methodological Approach**

The andragogical model for micro-credentials is illustrated through a pilot case example from Finnish University of Applied Sciences' collaboration (3UAS), in which two-hour micro-credentials were designed in the spring of 2026 for adult students from different fields. The micro-credentials were being piloted through 3UAS collaboration between Haaga-Helia, Laurea, and Metropolia universities of applied sciences. They were designed for EQF level 6, corresponding to Bachelor's level, but were also open to Master's students and recent graduates.

The two themes of this pilot study were Finnish as a second language and intercultural communication, which are both seen as key employability skills (Dufva et al., 2026; Kovalainen, 2022). In this article, the latter topic is discussed via preliminary result analysis. Context-specific intercultural communication was selected as the perspective for analysis because verifying transnational competence—that is, competence that can be applied across different situations through time—within a two-hour timeframe would be practically impossible without follow-up monitoring (Kovalainen, 2022). Instead, these short-duration micro-credentials function as foundational building blocks within a stackable continuum. The two-hour performance situation serves as a micro-level baseline that validates immediate, context-bound intercultural skills, which learners can gradually aggregate, reflect upon, and transfer into broader TNC agency over time. For example, the first intercultural communication badge, Core Badge 1, focused on building shared meaning in multicultural and multilingual collaboration. Participants were expected to demonstrate their ability to clarify interpretations, negotiate meanings, and ensure inclusive interaction.

These micro-credentials were built around authentic working-life situations, such as multilingual virtual teamwork, intercultural negotiations, and client communication. Business representatives from different fields were consulted in identifying suitable themes. Altogether ten people participated in the micro-credentials developed and piloted in the project. In the micro-credential performance situations, learners demonstrated their existing competence through various simulations, in which they connected the learning outcomes with their prior

experience and professional identity (see also Knowles et al., 2005). Competence was, for example, verified by taking part in a negotiation or meeting simulation in which each participant had their own objectives and role in addition to the shared task objectives. During the performance situation, time was allocated for reading the task instructions, and at the end of the performance, each participant reflected and articulated both their own competence and that of their peers in accordance with the task instructions.

In this pilot development project, the micro-credentials were designed to form a stackable learning continuum of three core competences, two context competences, and one capstone competence (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Stackable Micro-credentials in Intercultural Communication*



*Note.* Created with the assistance of NotebookLM on 16 May 2026. Alt text: A three-level staircase model showing learners progressing from foundational intercultural skills to applied competence and excellence through core badges, context badges, and a final keystone badge.

The preliminary results and feedback indicate that this type of conceptual and practice-informed approach is suitable for developing micro-credential frameworks for emerging educational phenomena.

## Results

Based on the pilot study, the following principles can be seen to guide the pedagogical design of micro-credentials:

- **Authenticity.** Learning is grounded in authentic or realistic working-life situations in which competence is demonstrated through practice. This supports both the meaningfulness and transferability of competence.
- **Competence Demonstration.** The emphasis is on what learners are able to do, rather than merely on what they know. Competence becomes visible through action and application.

- **Reflection and Articulation.** Learning includes guided reflection through which learners make sense of and articulate their competence. Recognition of competence requires structured processes of articulation, not merely assessment.
- **Recognition of Prior and Emerging Competence.** Learners' previous experiences and existing competences are recognised and integrated into the learning process, while developing competences are made visible and further strengthened.
- **Agency and Self-Direction.** Learners act as active agents who influence both the process and direction of their own learning.
- **Multidimensional Competence.** Transnational competence is understood as a broad and transnational construct comprising linguistic, cultural, institutional and digital dimensions.

### The Andragogical Transnational Micro-credential Model (ATM)

To build on the pedagogical design principles and to develop the idea of micro-credentials further, we propose that the said micro-credentials would receive their topics from the working life, not necessarily from the syllabi. The Andragogical Transnational Micro-Credential Model (ATM) describes a four-stage cycle for developing intercultural and transnational communication competence through work-based micro-credentials. The model combines andragogical learning principles (Knowles et al., 2005), authentic working-life activity, and competence verification. At the centre of the model is a professional agency, which emphasises the learner's ability to act effectively in transnational communication environments.

**Figure 3**

*The ATM Model for Work-Based Micro-credentials (Kovalainen, 2026)*

**The Andragogical Transnational Micro-Credential (ATM) Model**



*Note.* Created with the assistance of ChatGPT on 5 March 2026. Alt text: The image shows the ATM model for creating micro-credentials, presented as a segmented circular form.

1. **Work-Based Trigger.** The micro-credential skills demonstration begins with an authentic working-life situation, such as intercultural teamwork, multilingual expert communication, or international negotiations. This ensures the relevance of learning and its transferability across different contexts. Any relevant form of business collaboration between a higher education institute (HEI) and its business partners can be effectively utilised at this stage.
2. **Action-Based Performance.** Participants demonstrate their competence through concrete action, such as simulations, documents, or recorded interaction situations, shifting the focus from theory to observable performance. The action itself is also a valuable part of the process, as the micro-credential performance is designed to offer a place to experience the topic effectively and in a safe environment. The badge is designed and evaluated by qualified teachers, ensuring that international, national, and institution-specific frameworks are taken into account.
3. **Andragogical Reflection.** Self-reflection, integrated as an essential part of the performance, connects the task with the learner's prior experience, assumptions, identity, and professional growth. This stage enables meaning-making and the development of agency. Peer feedback also plays an important role.
4. **Competence Verification.** Micro-credential skills demonstration outcomes are validated in different ways depending on the organisation's guidelines and the content of the micro-credential, for example, through digital badges or portfolios that are accessible after graduation from a HEI. Feedback from employers or business partners may support this process when appropriate. Micro-credentials are stackable and divided into core and contextual competence levels, and after completing all of them, participants may apply for a broader capstone micro-credential, that is, an integrative final performance (European Commission, 2024).

The model benefits students in any field, as well as teachers, because updating one's competence and maintaining interest in one's work are naturally important for us as educators. The model benefits working life, as professionals entering the labour market will have competence and knowledge related to both the foundations of their profession and the latest developments in their field. The focus of the model is not on professional expertise or cultural knowledge as such, but on verifiable communication competence required by the situation, as well as identity-related dimensions of professional communication across borders (Kovalainen, 2022).

## **Discussion**

### **Micro-credentials as Interfaces**

At the same time as education funding is on a challenging footing, adult students preparing for their future professions require forms of learning that are relevant, flexible, and directly applicable to their professional contexts (cf. Dufva et al., 2026). They need realistic and carefully designed practice in intercultural communication. Over time, such competence can develop into transnational communication competence that can be applied in real professional situations (Kovalainen, 2022).

Work-based micro-credentials offer a particularly effective pedagogical response to the changing competence requirements of working life, especially when they are built on the verification of adult learners' experience, agency, and professional identity. Adult learning theory emphasises learner autonomy, prior experience, and readiness to apply knowledge in

practice. According to Knowles et al. (2005), adult learners are self-directed and motivated to learn when learning is immediately relevant to their lives. This creates a strong foundation for micro-credentials and competence-based assessment.

After the pilot implementations of the micro-credentials, it seems that these types of micro-credentials offer various benefits as they function as interfaces connecting work, learning, and recognition. The ATM model proposed in this article would benefit individuals and teams in both higher education and work life. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that in the current pilot project, the two-hour micro-credential does not claim to fully assess TNC. Instead, it acts as an operational stepping stone. It helps transform tacit workplace experiences into explicit intercultural evidence, serving as the necessary entry point from which broader transnational agency can be constructed. The next step could be to make use of key partner networks to identify more topics for work-based micro-credentials and to develop the micro-credential demonstrations to further support the development of this long-term communicative growth.

### **From Competence to Agency**

Micro-credentials may function as signals of competence and as structures for organising learning, but their real pedagogical value emerges only when they support articulation: learners' ability to make their existing or emerging competence visible, transferable, and meaningful in authentic transnational work contexts. Articulation of any given skill or competence is vital as articulated competence enables transnational communicative agency.

### **Repositioning Higher Education**

Higher education may need to further strengthen its role from providing new knowledge towards supporting the recognition, articulation and transferability of competence developed through work and experience. As experts in learning, higher education institutions can also support learners in making workplace learning visible and turning it into recognised and transferable competence.

If micro-credentials are developed only from the perspective of working life, they may remain mainly a way of signalling existing competence. If they are developed only within higher education, they may become just another way of dividing learning into smaller courses. Neither perspective alone seems sufficient. It could, therefore, be argued that the greatest value of micro-credentials is not the credential itself, but the pedagogical space they create between working life and higher education. In this shared space, competence developed through work can become recognised, articulated and transferable. At the same time, micro-credentials can support learners' employability, collaboration between higher education and working life, and the ability of higher education institutions to respond to rapidly changing transnational competence needs.

This also changes the role of the higher education teacher. Instead of only teaching new knowledge and skills, teachers design learning situations where competence can be demonstrated, reflected on and further developed. They also build connections between higher education and working life. At the same time, collaboration with employers helps teachers develop their own professional expertise and better understand changing professional practices, communication situations and emerging competence needs.

## **Conclusion**

The pilot demonstrates that short micro-credentials act as valuable interfaces connecting work life and education. While a two-hour performance cannot fully assess TNC, it serves as a stepping stone that transforms tacit experience into explicit evidence. The next step involves expanding partner networks to identify further work-based topics and support long-term competence development. The full potential of micro-credentials can be seen when they facilitate articulation, enabling learners to make competence visible and meaningful. This articulated competence is essential for strengthening transnational communicative agency. Micro-credentials can be seen as creating a shared pedagogical space between higher education and employers. This also further emphasises the role of the higher education teacher as a designer of learning situations where competence can be demonstrated, reflected on and further developed.

## **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The authors declare that Google Gemini was used for proofreading, verifying APA 7 referencing, and ensuring formatting compliance with conference guidelines. ChatGPT and NotebookLM were used to assist in creating graphic representations (Figures 2 and 3). Apart from language polishing, reference verification, and figure assistance, no AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

## References

- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2004). The articulated learning: An approach to guided reflection and assessment. *Innovative Higher Education*, 29(2), 137–154.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2013). *The beautiful risk of education*. Routledge.
- Billett, S. (2014). Mimesis: Learning through everyday activities and interactions at work. *Human Resource Development Review*, 13(4), 462–482.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (Eds.). (1994). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. RoutledgeFalmer.
- Dufva, M., Kiiski-Kataja, E., & Lähdemäki-Pekkinen, J. (2026). *Megatrends 2026: Towards a new social contract* (Sitra Studies 253). Sitra.
- European Commission. (2024). *A European approach to micro-credentials*.
- Fyfe, L., Heinrich, B., Kanar, A. M., & D'Intino, K. (2024). Competency articulation at the intersection of happenstance and experiential learning. *Industry and Higher Education*, 38(6), 534–546.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Cambridge Books.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (6th ed.). Elsevier.
- Kovalainen, N. (2022). *The role of intercultural communicative competence in transnational educational and occupational fields* [Doctoral dissertation, Tampere University]. Trepo.
- Kovalainen, N. (2026). Työelämälähtöiset mikrosuoritteet viestintäosaamisen varmentamisessa: Ammatillinen toimijuus keskiössä [Work-based micro-credentials for verifying communication competence: Professional agency at the core]. *Laurea Journal*.
- Laurea University of Applied Sciences. (2026). *Learning by Developing model*.
- Lewis, N., & Bryan, V. (2021). Andragogy and teaching techniques to enhance adult learners' experience. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 11(11), 31–40.
- Marsick, V., & Watkins, K. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*. Routledge.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Moon, J. A. (2013). *Reflection in learning and professional development: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Strachan, L. (2016). Teaching employability skills through simulation games. *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 6(2), 8–17.

Yeo, R. K. (2008). How does learning (not) take place in problem-based learning activities in workplace contexts? *Human Resource Development International*, 11(3), 317–330.