

Digital Badges as a tool to facilitate inclusion in the Norwegian workforce: labour market receptions and perceptions

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Preface

This thesis is the culmination of several years looking at digital badges as a possible means of giving recognition for non-formal and informal learning. It all started with a Bachelor dissertation reviewing empirical studies on the use of digital badges in different contexts. I aimed to document the ways that digital badges were used to validate non-formal and informal learning, and to understand whether they could motivate to participation in learning activities. In conducting this literature review, I found that whilst there was a lot of theoretical work on digital badges, empirical research was less easy to find, with many of the digital badge research taking place in the formal education system, and often in higher education settings. Work with digital badges in other arenas was dominated by pilot projects, many of which it was difficult to get information about.

At the same time, I started working on an Erasmus Plus Project with partners in Germany and The Netherlands. This thesis documents part of our learning curve, from the inception of our project in 2020, en-route to the final production of a conceptual toolkit for the scaling and implementation of digital badges in organisations in early 2023. Thank you @BadgEurope for the discussions, frustrations and, not least, the learning we have shared – it’s been quite a journey!

Thank you to my informants who made time to squeeze in interviews in the hectic post-pandemic recruitment market, giving me a valuable insight into their hiring practices.

Thanks to my supervisor, Elisabeth Hovdhaugen for her suggestions and constructive feedback throughout the writing process, and thank you to all who have listened, reflected, proof-read and looked for “*den røde tråden*” throughout my thesis. You each deserve multiple digital badges for the skills you have evidenced!

Last but not least, thank you, and apologies to my family for my absence at mealtimes, gymnastics competitions, football matches and “*kosekvelder*” - I owe you.

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Abstract

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Statistics indicate that participation in working life in Norway is to a large degree contingent on the number of years of formal education one has completed. However, whilst formal education is increasingly a prerequisite for entering and staying in employment, many adults have skills and competencies they have attained outside of the formal learning arena which can be a valuable resource to an employer.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is an area with little standardisation, and processes for the validation of prior learning are aimed towards those wishing to seek further education rather than to those looking to enter employment or to change jobs. This study researches whether digital badges could be used to facilitate inclusion in working life by filling a gap in the current Norwegian system by making visible any skills and competences not gained in formal schooling.

This was a qualitative study comprising of interviews with six Norwegian organisations who employ to positions requiring no formal competence, and three connector organisations. The data was coded and analysed using thematic analysis, and findings were discussed from the perspectives of credentialism and workplace motivation to ascertain whether digital badges can bridge the dichotomy between formal learning and validation of skills and competences gained in non-formal or informal arenas.

Findings indicate that in the current post-pandemic labour market, a lack of documented schooling does not pose a barrier for entry to the workforce in Norway. Applicants are appraised at interview with work experience, language skills and personal attributes being the most important factors in hiring decisions for unskilled positions. Although none of the informants were familiar with the digital badge concept, it was acknowledged that digital badges could be an important tool for skills validation in the workplace, not only systemising workplace training, but also strengthening individuals' self-awareness, motivation, and their connection to working life.

Contents

Preface	i
Abstract	ii
Contents.....	iii
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Background for thesis	3
1.2 Research focus and Research questions	4
1.3 Structure of dissertation.....	4
2.0 Digital Badges and some of the research to date	5
2.1 A brief introduction to digital badges	5
2.2 A note on terminology	7
2.3 Existing digital badge research and the digital open badge situation today	8
2.3.1 Digital badges and the world of work	9
2.3.2 Digital badges and validation of competence in a European context	11
3.0 Validation of Learning in a Norwegian context.....	13
3.1 Formal, Informal and Non-formal Learning.....	13
3.2 Initiatives for skills validation in a Norwegian context.....	14
3.3 Skills Reform; Learn for Life	17
4.0 Theoretical perspectives	19
4.1 Credentialism versus The Human Capital model	19
4.2 Workplace motivation	22
5.0 Methodology	26
5.1 Choice of and rationale for research design	26
5.2 Sampling strategy and recruitment of interviewees	27
5.2.1 Sampling Strategy	27
5.2.2 Recruitment	27
5.3 Data collection.....	30
5.3.1 The Interview guide	30
5.3.2 The Interview process	30
5.4 Data Processing and analysis.....	32
5.4.1 Transcriptions.....	32
5.4.2 Thematic Analysis – Codes and Themes	33
5.5 Reliability and Validity	34
5.6 Ethical considerations.....	35
5.7 Preconceptions and reflexivity	35

5.8 Methodological limitations	36
6.0 Empiri and analysis	37
6.1 Evidence of ability	38
6.1.1 Relevant experience	39
6.1.2 Documentation of Formal Competence	39
6.1.3 References and Personal attributes.....	41
6.1.4 Skills.....	42
6.2 Achievement at work.....	46
6.2.1 Systemisation	46
6.2.2 Legitimacy.....	47
6.2.3 Motivation	49
6.3 Challenges	51
6.3.1 Reliability and Trust.....	52
6.3.2 Standardisation	54
6.3.3 Resources	54
6.4 Findings in relation to expectation	56
7.0 Discussion	57
7.1 Entry to working life – what are employers looking for?.....	58
7.2 Skills validation in the workplace: potential roles for Digital Badges	61
7.2.1 Overview of competence and legitimisation of training	62
7.2.2 Digital badges for motivation and reward.....	63
7.3 Concerns with the digital badge concept.....	66
7.3.1 Credibility.....	66
7.3.2 Standardisation	68
7.3.3 Resource issues	70
7.4 Limitations and weaknesses in the study.....	70
8.0 Summary and Conclusion	72
8.1 Contribution and suggestions for further research areas	73
References	75
Appendices	80
Appendix 1 – NSD Approval	80
Appendix 2 – Consent Form (In Norwegian).....	81
Appendix 3 – Interview Guide (In Norwegian).....	84

1.0 Introduction

“The language we use about people who may not have formal competence often means that we impoverish them. One can talk about people lacking resources. What do we mean by that? When you dig a little deeper, by asking what they actually did before coming to Norway, it turns out they’ve dragged a wife and five kids through the desert to get here. That’s not weak in resources!”

Connector Organisation

It is widely accepted that employment is an important arena for inclusion in society, however the statistics indicate that an individual’s possibility for participating in working life is relative to the number of years of completed formal education. Formal competence is increasingly a prerequisite for entering, and staying in, working life in Norway (Meld.St.14 (2019 – 2020), p. 63). According to unemployment figures for 2020 in Norway, over 43% of those unemployed were registered with primary – or no completed – schooling as their highest level of education (SSB, 2021). The statistics also indicate that those with no completed education are particularly vulnerable in periods of uncertainty. Between November 2019 and November 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, unemployment in Norway increased by 83 %, but for those with no registered or with incomplete basic education, the number of unemployed increased from 3761 to 10 240, an increase of 172% (SSB, 2021).

However, learning does not only occur within the formal education system, and there are numerous ways of acquiring skills and competencies which can be a valuable asset in the workplace. The Norwegian report on Future Competence Needs states that “cognitive, ethical, critical, digital, social and emotional competencies will have greater meaning in the future ... and together constitute a valuable and future-oriented competence. Such skills give individuals the ability to adapt to ever-changing skills needs” (NOU 2020:2, p.15). Although the report recognises the importance of informal competences for participation in work and in other societal arenas, Norway, unlike some other European countries, still has no official system of validation for informal learning or for skills attained in the workplace (Meld.St. 14 (2019-2020), p.78).

Whilst the Education Act (§ 4A-3) makes the validation of prior learning and competence a statutory right for adults who have not completed formal secondary education, information about the validation process is not widely available, and employers have limited knowledge

of, and trust in, the system (Olsen et al.,2018, p.157). For the individual, a lack of documented competence may lead to exclusion from the workforce, therefore indicating that effective validation of learning is an important tool in competence development, benefitting not only those with a low level of formal education, but also enabling organisations to access and effectively utilise the skills available in the population (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21). As reported by Werquin (2010, p. 7) in an OECD report on recognition of informal and non-formal learning:

The link between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes and skills shortages is self-evident in virtually all countries and the disarmingly simple reason is that knowledge, skills and competences are often present but are not visible because they are not recognised. For example, they are not certified.

In this paper, I shall discuss the potential of Open Digital Badges as a tool for validation and documentation of learning to make skills gained through informal and non-formal learning more visible. Digital badges are digital images which represent an individual's learning within a specific domain; images which are embedded with metadata that gives information about the context, criteria and outcome of a learning activity. Not reserved for the domain of formal education, digital badges are widely used to document non-formal and informal learning outcomes, and badges can be collected from multiple issuers in a single App., making them accessible, transparent and portable. Although launched in 2012, open digital badges are largely unknown in Norway, so, to research their potential, this thesis will present and discuss the data collected from interviews I have undertaken with employers and connector organisations who have contact with people with a low attachment to working life.

Digital Badges have been proposed as an alternative credentialing system and Willis III and colleagues (2016) suggest that digital badges may be "... a postmodernist advancement against the metanarratives of a collegiate education and the culturally perceived value of that credential." The thesis will investigate the dichotomy between credentialism and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning to discuss whether digital badges may be a means of conciliating these two opposing concepts.

1.1 Background for thesis

In 2012, The Council of the European Union suggested that validation of skills and informal learning could contribute to increasing job opportunities and mobility, which may be especially relevant for those with a lower level of education or who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

Autumn 2020 saw the start of a 30 month Erasmus Plus project whereby Folkeuniversitetet (my employer) partnered with Stichting Bloom, an NGO in The Netherlands, and Relevantive GmbH, a digital innovation organisation focussing on non-linear learning in Germany. Entitled “Scaling and Implementation Plan for Digital Badges across Europe,” the Erasmus Plus project seeks to understand whether digital badges could be a viable solution for the recognition of informal skills and non-formal learning to help those with low levels of formal education enter the labour force. Whilst the project partners work with different demographics, the target group for the project is defined as “people with distance to the labour market.” This term is understood as a conceptual distinction which encompasses those who are not in employment, education or training (so-called NEETS), and those who face challenges getting into work due to limited general education.

The project's culmination at the end of 2022 will be in the production of a conceptual model and toolkit to be used by organisations wishing to implement digital open badges in recognition of skills and competencies. The model will be based on the partners’ research during the project period, incorporating feedback from learners, educators, policy makers and employers, and examples of best practice from existing digital badge initiatives.

As the participant in the Erasmus Plus project on behalf of Folkeuniversitetet, I wanted to gain an insight into the Norwegian labour market’s awareness and perceptions of digital open badges as a tool for inclusion in the Norwegian workforce. I aimed to discover whether digital badges may contribute to validating informal and non-formal learning outside of the formal education system to help the target group into working life. The stakeholders I selected for my study were organisations which recruit jobseekers for jobs with no formal competency requirements. My aim was to understand recruitment practices for these kinds of position and to ascertain whether digital badges could be used to make jobseekers’ skills and competencies more visible to potential employers, thereby increasing an individual’s employability and their integration into working life. In this thesis, I will use the term

“persons with a low attachment to the labour market” as this also includes people who are employed but are vulnerable in times of change and uncertainty. The data which emerged from my interviews has a strong focus on this group, and on developing their competence to safeguard their future participation in working life.

1.2 Research focus and Research questions

This study aims to answer the research question:

How do employers in Norway perceive Digital Open Badges as a potential tool for skills recognition to facilitate inclusion in the workforce?

Further, the thesis will focus on the following sub-questions:

- How do employers evaluate the skills of those applying for jobs where no formal skills are required and which personal attributes do employers value in jobseekers?
- What role could digital badges play in strengthening the position of those with little formal education and a low attachment to the labour market?
- What barriers are envisaged to the use of digital badges in Norwegian organisations and how could these be overcome?

1.3 Structure of dissertation

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 will briefly present the digital badge concept, followed by a review of some digital badge literature to date, with a particular focus on digital badges used in working life. Starting with an explanation of different types of learning, Chapter 3 will review different initiatives for recognising and validating skills in Norway, and will present the Skills Reform – Learn for Life (Meld. St. 14, (2019 – 2020)). Chapter 4 will present the two theoretical angles which I have chosen to compare in respect of digital badges – credentialism and workplace motivation. My choice of method is explained in Chapter 5 which describes the research process, whilst in Chapter 6, I will present my findings and analysis of the data collected. I will discuss my findings in light of theory and the existing research in Chapter 7. The work concludes with a summary of findings in relation to my research questions, and suggestions for future study areas which may complement and further the research in this field.

2.0 Digital Badges and some of the research to date

This section introduces open digital badges and continues by reviewing some of the empirically based literature to date which is relevant to the use of digital badges in an employment context. The review of the workplace literature focuses on publications from the past five years, however some theoretical perspectives from earlier works are mentioned below as an academic backdrop. The literature search focused primarily on English language publications, as no evidence of literature in a Norwegian context was found.

2.1 A brief introduction to digital badges

A digital badge is a visual digital representation of achievement, which can be awarded to document qualifications, skills or competencies acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning. Badges can be issued by institutions or organisations in the form of a digital graphic which contains core metadata about where, by whom, for what and when it was issued. The metadata details the validation criteria that the earner had to meet to attain the digital badge, and specifies the badge's expiration (if applicable). Badges can potentially be awarded for anything – from attendance in class, to interest and engagement, knowledge or course completion.

Badges are found in two types of system; open and closed. Whilst closed systems allow earners to view their credentials within that particular system (e.g. Credly, Duolingo), open badges adhere to a common Open Badge Infrastructure (OBI) which can be integrated into any compatible Learning Management System (LMS), allowing badge earners to export their attained badges into open “backpacks” or Apps that collect and display micro-credentials from many different formal and informal learning systems. Badges are termed as “stackable,” which means that badges can be combined to build upon each other, and the earner can choose to share their whole badge portfolio or selected combinations of badges with potential employers or on Social Media platforms. This capacity for amalgamating and sharing qualifications and personal competencies in varying combinations allows for a more versatile and comprehensive picture of an individual than can be shown on a CV (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018, s. 10).

The figure below illustrates the eco-system for a digital badge, and the process between the issue of a badge on completion of pre-ordained criteria, through to the recognition or acceptance of a badge by the receiving party.

Figure 1.

The Open Badges Eco-system (Erik Knutson, n.d., Concentric Sky)

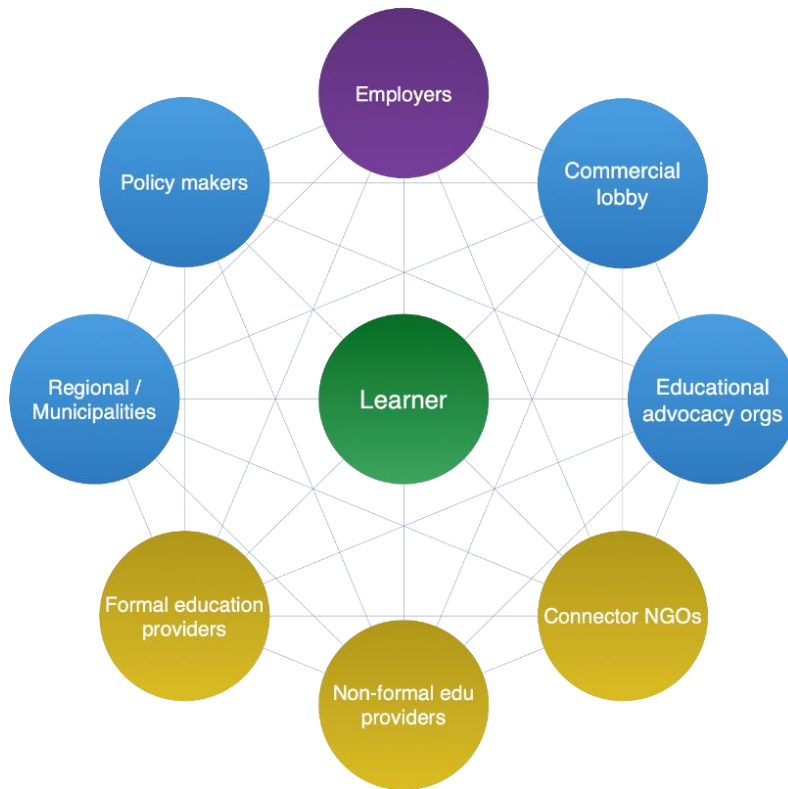


Stakeholders in the badge eco-system can broadly be divided into three groups; Issuers, Badge Recipients (Learners/ Earners) and Consumers (institutions which accept badges as evidence that the bearer holds a given skill or qualification). The three groups each comprise a variety of stakeholders. Badge Issuers may, for example, be educational institutions, NGOs, organisations or course providers, whilst consumers may be employers, recruitment agencies, unemployment agencies or educational admissions departments. Educational policy makers can potentially accredit the whole ecosystem. Figure 2 on the next page gives a more detailed overview of the actors and their interdependencies in an extended badge eco-system.

A further group which is not shown on the diagram but which is available in some badge systems is that of badge endorser. Endorsement is an act of giving public approval and support for an Open Badge that has been received, an activity, or an issuer (Everhart et al., 2016). An endorser is a third party who publicly verifies or supports an aspect of the badge award, in much the same way as can be seen on social media sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook. Endorsers can therefore be individuals or organisations, and these may come from any one of the groups in the diagram.

Figure 2.

The actors and the interdependencies within a digital badge eco-system (BadgEurope, 2022)



2.2 A note on terminology

There exists a varied terminology around digital credentialing, with many terms being used interchangeably and synonymously; digital badges, open badges, open digital badges (ODBs), digital open badges and micro-credentials to name the main ones. It can be understood that digital badges are a form of micro-credential (Chakroun & Keevy, 2018, p. 15), and that “credentialing” or “digital credentialing” is the label which is applied to the concept of giving credit for skills or achievements, whilst “badging” pertains to the technology behind digital credentialing (BadgEurope, 2022). In the interviews conducted with organisations in Norway, I used the term “digital badges” as I wanted to ascertain whether digital badges were a recognised phenomenon in Norway, and was particularly interested in the concept of using this form of digital credentialing to document informal skills, experiences and competencies, rather than formal qualifications for which a “micro credential” may be awarded. This thesis will continue to use the appellation «digital badges» for the sake of consistency.

2.3 Existing digital badge research and the digital open badge situation today

Whilst Digital Badges have been in circulation since their launch by Mozilla Foundation, Peer 2 Peer University og MacArthur Foundation in 2012, there does not seem to have been a real breakthrough in their usage, and certainly not in Norway. Figures from IMS Global Learning Consortium indicate that there were 43,3 million Open Digital Badges issued globally in 2020 (IMS Global, n.d), and projects such as “Badge the world” (Open Badge Network, n.d.) evidence many European badge projects, however there is little empirical documentation of results.

In the literature, digital badges have been discussed in light of a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Ahn and colleagues, (2014) propose that the three factors which are integral to the concept of badging are pedagogy, motivation and credentialing, elements which are inextricably interwoven through all stages of the learning process. Much of the education literature focuses on pedagogical approaches to badges (i.e Hickey & Chartrand, 2019), badge design (i.e, Fanfarelli, 2019) and badges in formal education settings (i.e Gibson et al., 2015).

Motivation is another area present in the literature and whilst it is often incorporated into the pedagogical literature, some papers apply specific motivation theories to badging (i.e Hodges & Harris, 2017, Pangaribuan & Febriyanto, 2019). The arguments for badges as a motivational tool cover both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In a gamification approach to learning, Ahn and colleagues (2014, p.3) suggest badges and leader boards incentivise active participation through the promise of reward and recognition and Gibbons (2020, p. 128) reports that the lure of gaining a badge to improve employment opportunities increased student motivation in an engineering degree course. Gibbons also found that digital badges improved interest and enjoyment in the course, and that students experienced an increase in self- confidence, both of which can be linked to intrinsic motivation (Gibbons, 2020, p.126).

Literature evidencing or discussing digital badges as a credential is however less conclusive. Since their inception, one of the main discussions around digital badges has centred around their feasibility as an alternative or supplementary credentialing system, the basis of this argument being that the world has changed since traditional educational systems were established, and that we now live in an information society whereby knowledge is available to us from a plethora of sources (Mozilla et al., 2012, p.4). Both as a result of increased access

to online knowledge, and unequal access to traditional schooling, much learning takes place in non-formal or informal contexts, however this learning may be unrecognised as there is no system for capturing and validating these learning outcomes. As digital badges can be awarded for a potentially limitless set of skills and achievements, they could be used as a parallel system of accreditation, to capture learning that has occurred outside of the formal arena, thus complementing the traditional system. Rather than a summation of educational attainment, digital badges can represent an infinite continuum of accomplishments, both academic and informal (Willis et al., 2016, p. 36). Whilst Casilli & Hickey (2016, s. 121) view this as the potential for badges to enable “Lifelong Digital Learning Portfolios,” Roy & Clarke’s literature study concludes that whilst digital badges are useful to scaffold learning, there is currently not enough evidence to support their utility beyond the educational setting (2019, p. 2633).

2.3.1 Digital badges and the world of work

In line with the concept of a virtual portfolio of accrued skills and qualifications, digital badges can support employee mobility, allowing employees’ experiences, training, certifications and awards to move with the employee from one organisation to another (Ellis et al., 2016). In a workplace perspective, the use of digital badges can be divided into two broader areas, which, although overlapping, need to be considered separately: digital badges as a tool in the recruitment process providing evidence of an applicant’s sum competencies, and digital badges in workplace training or professional development programmes.

Whilst some empirical research about the employer perspective has been published from studies in Ireland and the USA (i.e Gibbons, 2020, Raish & Rimland, 2016,), there is generally little empirical evidence about exploration of digital badges outside the arena of formal education (Roy & Clark, 2019). Most studies are therefore contextually unconnected to groups which are in danger of exclusion from the labour market due to low formal competence. The research pertaining to working life uncovered by the literature review was based in organisations employing graduates, and much of the rhetoric in the literature focuses on graduate employment, with digital badges as a way of documenting students’ personal attributes and soft skills, which have been acquired whilst undertaking a formal degree.

Referring to the digital badge concept, Gibbons (2020, p. 135) reports from the employer perspective an alignment between the lifelong learning portfolio approach and (construction) industry approaches to continuous professional development (CPD), whilst Raish & Rimland (2016, p. 100) claim that digital badges can be used to evidence learning beyond the prescribed coursework in a clear and visual way, giving prospective employers a multi-dimensional impression of the candidate. Although digital badges were viewed favourably by employers in both of these studies, a lack of awareness was acknowledged as a barrier to the wider adoption of badges in both instances. This finding was supported by Perkins & Pryor who reported that only two of seventy-three employer organisations they surveyed had heard of digital badges (2021, p.29). Perkins & Pryor (2021, p. 35) also found that generic competencies and skills were an important consideration in the hiring decisions of the employers interviewed, indicating a competency-based approach to recruitment which may be facilitated by the way digital badges offer the recruiter a better insight into the granular skills of a candidate.

Insights into employer perspectives in Germany were published in the working paper *“Making competences visible with Open Badges”* (Buchem et al., 2019). Again, with an emphasis on collaboration between employers and higher education, a focus group interview with seven employers from various sectors revealed three areas that were considered of interest for the adoption of digital badges to facilitate transitions between education and the labour market. These were proof of professional experience as a gateway to higher education, evidence of competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning in sectors dependent on lateral entry (such as IT), and documentation of workplace learning (Buchem et al., 2019, p. 15).

Researching digital badges and recruitment from a Human Resources perspective, Buchem and colleagues (2019, p. 17) conducted a focus group discussion with eight HR experts from different organisations. The focus group categorised challenges within personnel management into three themes: talent identification, comprehensibility of CVs and documentation, and the promotion of learning cultures in organisations. In response to Digital Badges as a solution, provisos that were given as a prerequisite were a need for trust around the credentials; clearly-

defined, meaningful competencies arranged by sector or target group, and evidence of an established badge system already in use (Buchem et al., 2019, p.17).

Whilst there is strong and varied evidence of digital badges in Professional Development there is little research detailing the employers' perspectives on these initiatives, other than opinion articles recounting personal experiences with the badge initiative in question. The evidence for digital badges in Professional Development stems largely from the large multi-national corporates, with IBM (IBM, n.d.) listing 1308 available badges on their Training site; Microsoft offering 172 badges through a closed badge system (Credly, n.d.) and Ernst and Young offering their employees badges in skills such as data visualisation, transformative leadership and inclusive intelligence (EY, n.d.). Gamrat and colleagues (2014, 2021) researched digital badges in the context of professional development in teacher training programmes, finding that personalised learning paths and autonomy in learning experiences were two of the benefits reported by teachers, whilst Young and colleagues' (2019) study of an engineering technology provider found that employees who earned badges shared them on social media, potentially increasing brand awareness for the employer. These were however case studies, so represent a very limited context.

2.3.2 Digital badges and validation of competence in a European context

In 2012, The Council of the European Union recommended that member states put in place systems to validate the knowledge, skills and competences which people have acquired through non-formal and informal learning. In 2020, an evaluation of this recommendation called for greater development of the links between validation and micro-credentials (The Council of the European Union, 2022).

Whilst not pertaining exclusively to digital badges, the Council of the European Union's recent proposal on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, suggests that micro-credentials (2022, p.8):

...can be used as part of targeted measures to support inclusion and accessibility to education and training for a wider range of learners. This wider range of learners includes disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities, the

elderly, low-qualified/skilled people, minorities, people with a migrant background, refugees and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their socio-economically disadvantaged situation).

The recommendation encourages member states to support the development of micro-credentials within non-formal and informal settings and to consider adapting procedures for the recognition of prior learning and the validation of non-formal and informal learning to allow for the awarding of micro-credentials (2022, p. 18). In the context of the labour market, it is suggested that micro-credentials can address skills mismatches and can support and motivate those with a low attachment to the labour market to enter or continue in working life (2022, p.21).

3.0 Validation of Learning in a Norwegian context

This section will start with a definition of formal, informal and non-formal learning, before moving on to describe the Skills Reform (Meld.St. 14, 2019 – 2020) and then look at different initiatives for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway.

3.1 Formal, Informal and Non-formal Learning

Learning, according to Illeris (2012, p. 16), can be defined as "any process which, in living organisms, leads to a permanent capacity change and which is not only due to forgetting, biological maturity or ageing." This definition acknowledges that the concept of learning is not confined to knowledge acquired through formal education systems, but that learning processes encompass other forms of acquired competence and personal development.

Formal learning can be understood as learning that is acquired in traditional educational settings, such as schools or universities. Such courses of study usually have pre-defined learning goals, and, on completion, lead to certification or a qualification which validates the learning and offers the individual a way in to either further education or the labour market (Biesta et al., 2011, s. 32).

Similar to formal learning, non-formal learning is also planned learning, with structure and pre-defined learning goals, and often a support system for the learner (The Council of the European Union, 2012). Non-formal learning takes place in learning arenas outside of the official education system, for example in adult education, workplace training, or on net-based courses, such as MOOCs.

Informal learning differs from both formal and non-formal learning in that it is often unintentional and can be defined as any learning that takes place as part of daily life, without it being planned, structured or conscious (Biesta et al., 2011, s. 17). Occurring in a range of settings throughout the life course, much informal learning is, according to Biesta and colleagues, tacit and goes unrecognised as learning even by the learners themselves.

Experiential learning gained in arenas such as the workplace, in voluntary work, and through participation in various activities can result in new knowledge, competencies or skills for the individual. The identification and validation of informal learning in working life is in the

interests of both employers and policy makers whose aim is to increase the skills and capacities of the workforce (Biesta et al., 2011, p.17).

3.2 Initiatives for skills validation in a Norwegian context

Although there have been initiatives for establishing frameworks for the validation of skills and competencies since the Skills Reform of 1998 (Ure, 2019, p.2), there is still no official system in Norway for documenting a person's total skills and competencies accrued through informal and non-formal learning (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 78).

Since the early 2000s, Validation of prior learning (VPL) - *Realkompetanse Vurdering* - either at primary, secondary or at tertiary level, has been available for adults wishing to get a formal validation of their competencies. Adults may apply to get recognition and approval for the prior learning they have accumulated in the course of paid or unpaid work; experience in organisations or through leisure activities (Udir, n.d.). There is no distinction made between the kind of learning validated – formal, non-formal or informal - and the process is voluntary and aimed at benefitting the individual (Cedefop, 2021, p. 9). However, the system today evaluates all prior learning against the learning outcome criteria for formal education.

VPL can be used as attestation that an individual fulfils the competence requirements for completing a given level of education, or it can be used to apply for further or higher education programmes for which the applicant does not meet the formal requirements. Whilst at secondary level it is possible to get either a full qualification (Certificate) or a partial qualification (Certificate of Competence), at tertiary level a full certificate can only be obtained after passing the Tradesman's exam. The VPL process consists of four stages; **identification**, whereby the candidate evaluates whether to apply, **documentation**, where they collect relevant evidence, **assessment**, and finally **certification**. At primary and secondary level, assessment is carried out by the municipality, whilst, for tertiary or HE entry, it is the individual institution that assesses the candidate's eligibility for admission. Assessments are made using different means, but the basic principal for VPL is that candidates do not need to sit formal tests or exams, so can document their competence by presenting a portfolio and participating in a dialogue (Ure, 2019, p 24). VPL is linked to the learning outcomes which are detailed in the Norwegian National Qualifications Framework.

Transversal skills are embedded in the learning outcomes in the curricula of upper secondary education, so these skills can also be validated, provided the candidate has fulfilled the criteria for the relevant curriculum.

According to The Education Act (1998, § 4A-3), the validation of prior learning and competence is a statutory right for adults who have not completed their tertiary education, however such evaluations are not aimed at those who are looking to evidence their skills in order to change job or to enter the labour market (Meld. St. 19 (2019-2020), p. 78). Olsen et al., (2018, p. 160) report that there is little interest for VPL in working life, and comment on the lack of standardisation for the validation of workplace learning. Ure (2019, p 3) suggests that this may be a result of the strengthening of Human Resource Development as a scientific discipline with its own procedures and methods of recognising competence internally, something which may also apply to competence requirements concerning the hiring of new staff.

In 2011, the National Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (*Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring (NKR)*) was introduced in Norway with the aim of making the qualifications system transparent, also allowing for comparison and alignment with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), with which it became aligned in 2014 (Cedefop, 2021, p.14). The NQF consists of seven levels from 2 – 8, encompassing primary, vocational and higher qualifications. The descriptors at each level are knowledge, skills and general competence and the framework specifies the learning outcomes for the elements at each level of qualification. A further objective of a national qualification framework was to “open the way for the development of new instruments of validation of non-formal and informal learning,” and as mentioned above, VPL is validated against the learning outcomes in the framework (Cedefop, 2021, p. 4).

In 2017, The Norwegian strategy for skills policy 2017 – 2021 was an agreement signed by the Norwegian Government, social partner institutions and the Norwegian Association for Adult Learning (VOFO) which has the overall aim of “... contributing to individuals and organisations having expertise which gives Norway a competitive private sector, an efficient and good public sector, and ensures that as few people as possible are unemployed” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 4). It proposes three main investment areas: ensuring alignment of

competence and labour market needs; promotion of learning in the work arena, and strengthening the competence of adults with a low connection to working life. The strategy acknowledges that effective validation of learning is an important tool in competence development, also helping businesses gain better access to relevant labour. The strategy pledges that methods and models for evaluating and documenting skills acquired in working life should be developed so that this competence can be utilised more effectively, and the need for a simplified and better system for validating overseas education, professional qualifications and other training is expressed (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21).

Whilst VPL is a general measure available for all, there have also been some specific initiatives aimed at certain groups. The international Erasmus KA3 initiative *Visible Skills for adults* (VISKA, 2017 – 2020) aimed to make visible the skills of low-skilled adults, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in order to improve employability, access to education and inclusion in society (Alfsen et al., 2020, p. 14). The lead partner in the programme was Skills Norway (*Kompetanse Norge*) and the focus during this project was to simplify access to VPL for migrants in order to facilitate their further professional development in Norway (Alfsen et al., 2019, p. 17). A self-registration tool (*Kompass*) was developed, through which 69 of 612 the asylum seekers participating in the pilot gained validation for learning at tertiary and vocational levels (Alfsen et al., 2020, p. 82). One of the key achievements of this project was to instigate change in the Norwegian law concerning VPL, allowing for assessment of prior learning to be made in languages other than Norwegian and Sami, by using an interpreter in the assessment process (Changes in regulations to the Education Act, 2019, §4-13)

Although concerning skills *recognition* rather than *validation*, A Balancing Act (*Balansekunst*), established by Virke in 2018 is an award-winning model and methodology developed by a collaboration of trade unions serving the trade and service industry in Norway. The model aims to recognise experiential learning in the workplace, and to document the skills gained through daily work tasks and workplace training. The project is based on five case studies in different contexts, and its aim is to make skills visible in a way that they can be more transparent, thereby increasing workplace mobility (Skjerve, 2020, p. 7). The case studies in the project cover the retail, healthcare and education sectors and the focus is on establishing and describing learning outcomes for activities performed in the workplace, which may then be developed to a sectoral skills standard. This standard could

then be used in validating prior experience by documentation of skills acquired in the workplace. A Balancing act is relevant for this thesis as it exemplifies the kinds of granular skills which may be learnt in working life but which may not lead to any formal certification. The conclusion of the project was that, in addition to raising an individual's awareness of the skills s/he possesses, the skill descriptors which were developed in a Balancing Act can be used to make competence gained in the workplace more understandable for different stakeholders (Skjerve, 2020, p. 69). In the 2020 Skills Reform, the government confirmed that they would consider supporting an expansion of *A Balancing Act* if this was desired (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 79).

In addition to the validation of prior learning initiatives outlined above, there are also internal initiatives for acknowledging staff competence in organisations both in the private and public sectors (Ure, 2019, p. 9). An example of such an internal programme in the private sector is KIWI skolen which, according to website information, has certified over 10,000 employees in its twenty years of existence (Kiwi, 2018). In the public sector, Ure refers to a tool used by employees in a local municipality to record their learning and achievements, so that these may be considered in annual performance appraisals (Ure, 2019, p. 9). Such systems are internal to the individual organisations, and validation criteria are generally set by the organisation themselves, either locally, nationally or internationally.

3.3 Skills Reform; Learn for Life

On 22nd April 2020, the Skills Reform – Learn for Life was presented in Norway. The reform is part of the National Strategy for Skills policy, and focusses on implementing a skills policy which aims to ensure that people have the knowledge and competencies that they need to be able to work in a labour market where requirements for restructuring, innovation and value creation are rapidly changing ((Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 12). Digitalisation and restructuring are changing the competence and knowledge that are needed by organisations and their employees, and this reform addresses the need for an agile workforce that can reskill, upskill and adapt to new competence requirements.

Together with the inclusion effort and the integration pledge, which focus respectively on providing more opportunities for those with a low work attachment and offering better access

to education and training for immigrants, the Skills Reform will contribute to the government's strategy for a sustainable welfare society (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 19).

The reform has two goals. The first states that no one should have an expiry date due to lack of competence. Everyone should have the possibility to renew and supplement their skills so that more people can work, and stay in work longer. The second aim is to close the skills gap between the labour market's competency needs, and the skills that workers actually have (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 12).

The Skills Reform reports that the generally high level of human capital in Norway has increased productivity, consequently raising the threshold into working life and excluding the unskilled from employment (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 12). Whilst the Skills Reform focusses on improving education and training opportunities, particularly for those with a low connection to working life, it also acknowledges inadequacies in the current system of validating non-formal and informal learning (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 78). For those needing to document their skills acquired through experiential or non-formal learning, there is no official system for evidencing this competence, which can present problems for both the individual and for society (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 78). Individuals who have acquired skills through experience but have no documentation of this may find it difficult to enter working life as they are overlooked in recruitment processes due to a lack of formal qualifications. Those that are employed may be vulnerable in periods of organisational adjustment or downsizing, particularly in times of hardship, as formal qualifications are the accepted indicators of value. From a societal perspective, the consequent exclusion of individuals from the workforce results in under-utilisation of the competency available in the population (Meld. St. 14 (2019 – 2020), p. 78).

The Skills Reform goes on to recommend that actors in working life should be involved in the establishment of models and documentation for the validation of skills accrued in the workplace. Whether sectors wish to introduce a common sectoral standard for skills is up to the actors involved, however the government would be willing to evaluate support for trialling such initiatives (Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 79).

4.0 Theoretical perspectives

This chapter will present two main theoretical perspectives which are pertinent to my research: the background and implications of credentialism, and workplace motivation with particular emphasis on Self-determination theory. Workplace motivation is relevant in the dichotomy between credentialism and the validation of informal and non-formal learning, as this thesis discusses how, through the validation of such learning, motivation may be increased and can lead to an increased interest in learning generally, in formal, non-formal and informal arenas.

4.1 Credentialism versus The Human Capital model

Credentialism is based on the idea that an individual's competence, social status and worth are linked to the possession of formal academic qualifications (Scott, 2014). It centres on the belief that formal qualifications reflect the competence or attributes which are necessary for a certain role, and credentialing theorists purport educational certification as "a historical legitimization of advantages that empower degree holders in occupational and organizational recruitment" (Brown 2001, p. 20).

Credentialing theory originated in Max Weber's sociology, where it was observed that the growth in demand for credentials and the proliferation of educational credentials that were issued served to create a stratified society whereby desirable posts were reserved for those holding educational patents. Credentials were mechanisms by which to sort society into groups according to their education level. More recently, Collins uses the term a "sinecure society" to describe how educational credentials are used as the modern-day currency for acquiring favourable job positions (Collins, 2019, p. 75).

Brown (2001, p. 20) summarises the key elements by which credentialism can be defined:

- Content and occupational significance of credentials are cultural and exclusionary rather than technical and efficacious
- Formality of credentials overrides in importance the substantive knowledge of the credential bearer
- Credentials are monopolised by those in hiring positions and used as a cultural barrier to positions
- Credential inflation is a driver for educational expansion

The first two points, as asserted by Collins, purport that learning in the formal education system is more focussed on “conventional standards of sociability and propriety than with instrumental and cognitive skills” (2019, p. 25). The substantive content or the knowledge acquired in a degree is unimportant and simply attaining the formal credential at a given level will give access to the next stage, as a rite of passage (Collins, 2019, p.124). According to Brown (2001, p. 26), an academic credential is a “symbolic abstraction” giving the degree holder a formal attestation of their trustworthiness or competence, and the social credit attached to holding the credential grants the bearer automatic immunity from doubts about his or her competence.

In the recruitment process, credentialism can be defined as a reliance on academic qualifications when making decisions about the selection of applicable candidates (Heery & Noon, 2017). Historically, employers have used educational screening to cut down large pools of applicants, filter out less productive candidates, eliminate those without particular skills and to select applicants with a proven record of learning new tasks – irrespective of whether these were relevant for the position (Brown, 2001, p. 22). Rather than a meritocratic evaluation of an individual’s specific skills, credentialism views the completion of a degree as more of a cultural or social currency which legitimises the applicant’s status, granting them the possibility of entry to a job or profession.

The final point Brown mentions refers to one of the related consequences of credentialism: credential inflation, or “diploma disease,” which purports that, due to the belief that more education equates to better career prospects, individuals strive to gain more academic credentials in order to have more leverage in the labour market (Scott, 2014). According to Brown (2001, p. 19), there is a propensity for students to pursue higher education purely for the instrumental effects of a degree in job hunting, rather than a genuine “academic inclination,” ultimately, as Collins observes, leading to a preoccupation with “strategies for achieving grades with a minimum of learning” (2019, p. 24).

Collins asserts that credentialism largely maintains social stratification, as, whilst the lower classes increase their schooling, the higher classes do the same, thus maintaining relative educational achievement (2019, p.243). He views this as a societal problem asserting that the

“...rise of a competitive system for producing abstract cultural currency in the form of educational credentials” has been a major factor in shaping societal stratification in twentieth-century America” (2019, p.125).

From the employer perspective, the formal academic requirements for positions may be raised, as the pool of potential candidates possesses increasingly higher credentials. Those who may have been considered for positions previously – and who may have relevant competence and experience - become excluded during the recruitment process as they do not meet the increased formal entry requirements for the job.

However, the competences signified by credentials do not necessarily bear any relationship to the needs of modern work (Brown, 2001, p.20). One of the main critiques of credentialism suggests that academic qualifications do not automatically equate to competence, and suggests that factors such as practical experience may compensate for a lack of formal education and may be a better indicator of an individual’s suitability for a given role (Noon & Heery, 2017). Collins (2019, p. X), argues that most technological skills are learnt on the job or through informal networks, further postulating that even doctors could begin as orderlies before moving onto apprenticeships as physicians (2019, p. 267).

According to Collins (2019, p.243), the attainment of educational credentials has become the currency for employment, and those without a formal credential may be overlooked, irrespective of whether they may be better suited to a position. Collins argues that education systems do not teach the skills required in the labour market, and that abolition of credentials – decredentialing -would improve the quality of education by returning schools to a situation where “they must support themselves by their own intrinsic products rather than by the currency value of their degrees.” (2019, p. 263).

Collins also purports that a further benefit of abolishing credentials would be to remove entrance barriers to jobs, allowing blue-collar workers to learn on the job and progress to higher positions which have traditionally been reserved for those with higher academic credentials. This, he maintains, will improve social mobility and make steps towards overcoming income inequality (2019, p. 264).

While a major argument of credentialing theorists such as Collins is that higher education does *not* equip students with the skills which are necessary in working life, but is rather a

symbol of status, human capital theory is an economic theory which assumes that all education and training increase the value of an individual and all learning will have direct value in the labour market. Human capital is the combined knowledge, skills and experience of an individual, and people can increase their human capital by undergoing further education or skills training. Investments in human capital include schooling, on-the-job training, medical care, migration and economic information, and of these, it is education which purportedly has the greatest economic importance (Becker, 1993, p.12).

Whilst credential theorists argue that the value of education is influenced by societal and cultural aspects and that the worth of a credential is inextricably bound to this, human capital theory takes the more simplistic view that education and training equate to more economic value.

4.2 Workplace motivation

Employee motivation is a crucial factor in any workplace, inextricably linked not only to performance and productivity, but also to the job-satisfaction, commitment, and the well-being of workers, all of which are critical for the success of an organisation.

Motivation can be broadly defined by two types: *intrinsic* motivation which is derived from an individual's interest in and satisfaction from an activity, and *extrinsic* motivation which stems from factors which are external to the individual (Gagné and Deci, 2005, p. 331). According to Ryan & Deci (2017, p. 532), it is both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that are drivers of workplace engagement; intrinsic motivation through self-realisation and personal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation through the consequences of performing a task, which may be either positive or negative. Sources of extrinsic motivation in the working environment, therefore, may be tangible rewards or praise, or negative factors such as the pressure of deadlines, evaluation or of recrimination.

Early models of workplace motivation (e.g., Vroom's expectancy-valence theory (1964), Porter & Lawler's Managerial Attitudes and Performance Model (1968)) suggest that an individual's total motivation at work is the sum of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Later theories however, such as Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci, 1975), propose that certain external factors, such as rewards, may undermine intrinsic motivation by diminishing

an individual's feelings of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 123). Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) is both a forerunner to and one of the mini theories developed within the framework of Self-determination Theory.

Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a macro theory based on needs fulfilment which focusses on intrinsic motivation, and the degree to which an individual is self-motivating, or self-determining. Formally acknowledged as a theory in 1985, research in SDT has been developed, and the theory comprises of six "mini-theories", which expand on different aspects of psychological integration with motivation. (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p.20).

In accordance with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Ryan & Deci claim that people have both physiological and psychological needs which will affect their "growth, integrity and wellbeing." Of the psychological needs, SDT purports that the universal need to experience *autonomy, competence* and *relatedness* is necessary for an individual's wellbeing, development and inner motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p.10). A continuation of this idea is that social environments can be categorised on the basis of the extent to which they are autonomy supportive, effectance supporting and relationally supportive (Ryan & Deci, 2017, P.12). *Basic needs support* emerged as a concept to describe the conditions provided in social contexts such as workplaces to support the satisfaction of the three psychological needs, thus facilitating intrinsic motivation and wellbeing (Deci et al., 2017, p. 23).

From the SDT perspective, Ryan & Deci (2017, p.10) define *competence* as the need for people to experience "effectance and mastery,": that their skills are sufficient to accomplish the task or activity they set out to achieve. *Relatedness* refers to a person's sense of feeling socially connected and belonging to a group: that they are accepted as a significant member of a social organisation to which they contribute and belong.

Autonomy, according to Ryan & Deci, presupposes not only that the individual is allowed to perform an action independently, but also that he has an inner desire to perform it. SDT categorises actions according to the degree to which they are driven by the individual's own volition, or whether they are a result of external or internal pressures. This distinction between autonomy and control is one of the fundamental elements of SDT, and, whilst intrinsically motivated behaviour is autonomous by definition, SDT examines the degree to which an individual may experience autonomy, even when a task is externally controlled, dependent on the amount of regulation applied (Ryan & Deci 2017, p.14). It is this focus on the relative strength of autonomous motivation versus controlled motivation which Gagné & Deci

propose makes SDT particularly relevant for workplace motivation, since the level of regulation can be adjusted to give the worker more experience of autonomy (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 346).

The SDT autonomy- control continuum places Amotivation (a lack of motivation characterised by apathy and/or passivity) and Intrinsic Motivation (totally autonomous motivation) at opposite ends of the continuum (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 336). In between these two extremes, extrinsic motivation is then divided into four degrees of motivation, dependent on the amount of regulation imposed: External Regulation, Introjected Regulation, Identified Regulation, and Integrated Regulation respectively.

When a behaviour is motivated solely by the expected consequences from a source external to the individual, it is considered to be *externally regulated*. The promise of reward or praise, punishment or reproach are the motivators for completing a given action, thus the motivation is completely extrinsic and controlled (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14).

When external expectations or societal norms are taken in by an individual, and they feel compelled to conform to these standards, regulation is termed as *introjected*. Whilst the motivation for behaving in a certain way is controlled by the individual, the individual is under pressure to do so due to feelings of guilt, shame, self-esteem or pride, and therefore the primary motivation is still extrinsic and moderately controlled (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p.336).

The final two degrees of regulation on the autonomy–control spectrum are *identified* and *integrated* regulation which are theorised to offer the individual near-equivalent levels of autonomy to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 15).

Identified regulation implies that an individual is motivated to carry out an activity because they identify with the aims or purpose of the activity and perceive it to be meaningful and worthwhile, even if it is not intrinsically interesting. *Integrated regulation*, the final type of extrinsic motivation, is experienced when a given behaviour or activity so closely harmonises with an individual’s personal goals, values and beliefs, that it is central to their identity.

Whilst the main focus of SDT is on an individual’s need for autonomy, Bandura’s Self-Efficacy theory purports that motivation stems from an individual’s experience of efficacy, or “competency.” Bandura defines an individual’s perceived self-efficacy as “(...) beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given

attainments” (1997, p.3). The theory is thus focussed not on competence in itself, but rather on the way the individual views their own competence, and their expectations of being able to use their skills to accomplish a given task or deal with a particular situation.

Self-Efficacy is one of the central concepts in Social Cognitivism, and the theory proposes that an individual’s expectations of mastery will affect motivation – and effort expended - for performing a given task; the stronger the efficacy expectation, the more active the effort (1977, p. 194).

There are four sources of information which Bandura proposes will affect an individual’s expectations of success: (prior) performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (1977, p. 195). *Prior experiences* are the factor which Bandura proposes to be most influential for an individual’s self-efficacy, theorising that if an individual repeatedly succeeds in a situation, motivation will be enhanced, and the individual’s self-efficacy may be generalised to other situations (Bandura, 1977, p.195). As mentioned above, self-efficacy is a social-cognitive theory, affected by external social influences. *Vicarious experiences*, for example observing someone else’s success, positively affect an individual’s self-efficacy, as they give proof that a desired outcome is achievable. *Verbal persuasion*, particularly when the source of the encouragement is deemed credible, can also affect self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, p. 202). The final factor – *physiological states* - not only pertains to the emotional stimuli of the situation, but also encompasses the individual’s interpretation of their own performance, and the way the individual perceives the result of their efforts (Bandura, 1977, p.212).

Self-efficacy theory can be understood to be relevant for workplace motivation since an individual’s feeling of efficacy will have an influence on performance and for personal goal setting. The workplace is a social environment, thus the influences of colleagues and management will, according to Bandura, affect an individual’s perception of his own worth or competence.

5.0 Methodology

A method is the procedure in a research project, describing how the researcher proceeds in order to collect, analyse and interpret information about their topic of research (Johannessen et al., 2010, p. 29). Qualitative research seeks for meaning within context and is therefore well suited to studies aiming to understand social interactions, people's perceptions, processes, or sensitive or complex issues which need a deeper level of explanation than a quantitative approach usually offers (Silverman, 2021, p 15). Through an emphasis on words rather than numbers, qualitative research focuses on understanding situations from the perspectives of the people participating in them (Bryman, 2016, p. 375).

This thesis is based on qualitative data collected from interviews conducted in Norway between November 2021 and February 2022.

5.1 Choice of and rationale for research design

As I wished to research and document stakeholders' perceptions of the digital badge concept and gather insights into how digital badges may be used as an aid to inclusion and which barriers are envisaged to the adoption of digital badges, I chose to use qualitative semi-structured interviewing.

According to Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 315) semi-structured interviews can be used by researchers with a clear focus area, so that specific issues can be addressed. One advantage of employing a semi-structured rather than an unstructured approach is to ensure that there is a degree of standardisation in the interview process when interviews are to be conducted by more than one researcher, meaning that the assimilated data can be compared (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.315). As the empirical data collected in my interviews was later to be analysed in connection with results from researchers in other countries for the ongoing Erasmus + project, it was found that semi-structured interviews would best enable the results to be collated and compared, whilst still allowing for national variations.

A further benefit of the semi-structured interview is the flexibility that the approach offers; the interview may be re-ordered if deemed natural or appropriate, and the open nature of the questioning allows for the interview to pursue other factors or issues which may be relevant in order to gain a more comprehensive insight (Bryman, 2015, p. 468). As my informants come from a range of sectors – commercial actors, public organisations and NGOs, a semi-

structured approach allowed for the main topics to be covered, but with slight amendments in order for them to be contextually appropriate.

5.2 Sampling strategy and recruitment of interviewees

5.2.1 Sampling Strategy

A generic purposive sampling strategy was employed, with fixed a priori criteria for selection of interview subjects. The main criteria for all organisations interviewed was a relationship with adult persons actively seeking unskilled employment and /or with a weak connection to the labour market in Norway. Based on my prior knowledge of digital badges, and particularly in the Norwegian context, it was assumed that none of the organisations would have knowledge of, or experience with, digital badges.

5.2.2 Recruitment

In sourcing interview subjects, I initially turned to my employer, Folkeuniversitetet, which delivers a wide range of state-funded in-company courses through the *Kompetanse Pluss* initiative - a grant scheme for training in basic skills in reading, writing, arithmetic, oral communication, ICT and Norwegian or Sami (Kompetanse Norge, n.d.). Many of the organisations enrolled on *Kompetanse Pluss* courses employ unskilled labour within their industry sectors, with common sectors including hospitality, food production, catering, cleaning, care and building sectors. In order to come into contact with relevant individuals in different organisations, I contacted Folkeuniversitetet's sales team which has direct contact with these businesses. After a briefing on the required criteria for interview subjects, they provided a list of relevant company contact persons to whom I then sent details of the project and a request for a thirty-minute interview. Of the twelve speculative enquiries sent to organisations meeting the sample criteria, there were five respondents from organisations employing unskilled labour.

To access respondents in other relevant and related organisations (Work inclusion agencies, Recruitment agencies, Municipalities and Labour offices), contact was made through acquaintances in my professional network. A LinkedIn post requesting informants did not lead to any relevant responses.

An overview of the organisations interviewed is shown in Table 1. I have divided the organisations into two groups based on their functionality in the labour market: organisations who **receive** jobseekers (Organisations A – F = mid blue), and organisations who are **connectors** between jobseekers and employers (Organisations G, H, I = light blue).

Table 1.

Key to organisations interviewed grouped according to type of organisation

Type of organisation	Number of interviews	Key	Informant
Companies in branches employing unskilled labour	5	Organisation A (Facilities Management)	Informant 1
		Organisation B (Grocery stores and Facilities Management.)	Informant 2
		Organisation C (Hospitality)	Informant 3
		Organisation D (Food production - factory)	Informant 4
		Organisation E (Food production - factory)	Informant 5
Municipalities employing unskilled labour	1	Organisation F (Cleaning)	Informant 6
Work-inclusion / rehabilitation organisation	1	Organisation G	Informant 7
Local Office for Norwegian Labour & Welfare Service (NAV)	1	Organisation H	Informant 8 Informant 9 Informant 10
Recruitment Agency	1	Organisation I	Informant 11 Informant 12

The first group of organisations in the table are employers – organisations employing labour for low-skilled jobs, where no formal qualifications are required. For those looking to enter working life, employers are the entities which must ultimately accept and acknowledge any digital badges presented to them as proof of skills, experience or competence. The second group, which I have labelled “Connectors”, includes an NGO focusing on work inclusion for marginalised groups, a branch of NAV (the State labour and welfare service, or unemployment agency in Norway), and a private recruitment organisation. The common function of this group is that they convey potential candidates to the labour market, thus connecting jobseekers with employers, matching candidates with suitable positions.

While in many ways it would seem that the implications for the use of digital badges is much the same, I have chosen to differentiate between these two groups in order to ascertain whether function in the labour market affects the way in which an organisation perceives digital badges. One immediate difference observed between the Employer group and the Connector group was the number of interviewees that logged on for our meeting. Whilst the employer organisations were represented by one interviewee, two of the connector organisations chose to attend with two or more interviewees, which may reflect either (or both) respective time pressures or interest in the digital badge concept. Despite the two connector interviews being conducted with more participants, the same semi-structured format was followed and participants answered as they felt appropriate, building upon and questioning each other’s responses as they saw necessary.

A further distinction between the two groups was – particularly in the case of Informants 7 and 11 - a seemingly better understanding of jobseekers with a low attachment to the labour market and the particular issues that working with this group presented. For example, whilst these informants spoke knowledgably about, for example, levels of language ability, the employer informants spoke much more generally about language skills.

In preparation for the interviews, respondents to the initial e-mail contact were sent a short (3.24 minute) informational videoclip about Digital Badges (Metaliteracy Learning Collaborative, 2017, 04 Jan.), along with a brief overview of the topics that I was interested in researching. The decision to send an information video prior to the interview was twofold: a film clip could present the concept of digital badges in a concise, objective manner, both

providing insight for the interview subjects, whilst also limiting the time required for the interview. The clip I chose to use was deemed to be the best available in terms of length, content and comprehensibility – all film clips sourced were in English, so the language clarity and speed of delivery was a necessary consideration for a non-native speaker audience.

5.3 Data collection

5.3.1 The Interview guide

The interview guide for the research was developed in collaboration with the Erasmus + partners and later translated into the three local languages. As suggested by Bryman (2016, p. 470), the interview guide was established and then reviewed by the project partners in an iterative process, with questions being redefined to better address the research focus.

In preparing the interview guide, I first established the main topics on which I needed to collect data in order to gain an understanding of the labour market for unskilled positions, before moving onto the specific situation with digital badges:

- Background Information on the organisation – in order to be able to contextualise responses
- Recruitment processes and acknowledgement of learning
- Matching candidates to positions; sought-after skills and competencies
- Awareness of digital badges and perceptions of the concept

As recommended by Silverman (2017, p. 289), interview questions were aimed at gaining a wider background picture of the job market, rather than directly answering the research questions, so as to illicit a greater breadth of information.

Before conducting the research, the interview guide was piloted with professional acquaintances in order to uncover any issues with the themes and questions to be posed.

5.3.2 The Interview process

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2021 and February 2022. All interviews but one were conducted using Microsoft Teams, an approach that was imposed due to geographical factors and ongoing national restrictions pertaining to Covid-19. As informants were professionals who were used to working this way and were, it emerged, pressed for time, this interview form was effective, giving a standardisation to the interviews in terms of a time limitation.

To accurately capture and thereafter analyse interview data, audio recordings were made of eight of the interviews. The face-to-face interview was not recorded due to a technical issue (Organisation E). The interviews were recorded using the *Nettskjema Diktafon* App in addition to a separate recording device as a back-up in case of technical failure. The secondary recordings were stored in an access-limited area of a cloud-based storage solution to which I and my co-interviewer had exclusive access. They were stored separately from the identification key.

In order to comply with privacy and data security regulations governing audio-recordings of speech (General Data Protection Regulation), an application was submitted to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) for project approval in advance of the interview period which started in November 2021. In addition to the above, interview subjects were at the same time sent a project description and consent form (Appendix 3) together with the informational e-mails, and consent forms were returned by e-mail prior to the interviews taking place.

Two interviewers were present in each of the interviews – myself and the Norwegian colleague who was involved in the Erasmus + Project. There were several factors considered before choosing this approach. As some interviews were made through network connections, either one or the other researcher was often naturally present. From a practical perspective, it was decided that the researchers' roles during the interviews would be divided between interlocuter and note-taker in order to ensure that notes would be accurately recorded, and that note-taking would not detract from the focus of the dialogue (Bryman, 2016, p. 479). It was planned for the researchers to swap roles during the course of the interview, with one researcher engaging in the first part of the dialogue, before swapping roles half way through. Silverman (2017, p. 334) recommends taking detailed field notes to complement and strengthen the reliability of data and, in addition to the audio recordings, detailed notes were made during each interview. As a researcher, the notes taken during interviews enabled an overview of the data collected, prior to further processing after transcription. Notes were made in a shared document in a cloud-based document platform, to which the two researchers had exclusive access.

A further rationale for using two interviewers was that this approach allowed for discussions between the researchers about the data collected from each interview, and the possibility for any differing perceptions to be presented and examined. According to Bryman (2016, p.335) qualitative research has a focus on understanding situations by examining the way that participants interpret a situation, and a short debrief after each interview between myself and the other interviewer allowed a recap of the key points of the interview and the identification of any disparity in interpretation of the subject's responses. Following this debrief, a synopsis of the interview was written using the notes taken underway, in order to concisely record the essence of the discussion and the main opinions expressed.

5.4 Data Processing and analysis

Recording and subsequently transcribing interview data ensures that interviewee's responses can be more thoroughly analysed without the necessity of relying on the researcher's memory or interview notes (Bryman, 2016, p. 479). As soon as the interviews had been conducted, sound files were transformed into a text format so that I could proceed to condense and analyse the data collected.

I chose to use Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phase approach to thematic analysis which is a process of organising data and identifying recurring themes. Themes are defined as "something important about the data in relation to the research question... (which) represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The first step suggested by Braun & Clarke is familiarisation with the data set.

5.4.1 Transcriptions

Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed in full. In addition to ensuring that data is accurately recorded, the process of transcribing interviews allows the researcher to relive the dialogue and to develop a greater understanding of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.88). Transcribing the interviews soon after the event enabled me not only to become familiar with interviewee's responses, but also to become aware of formulations in the interview guide that were unclear, and to make iterative refinements to the interview delivery process (Bryman, 2016, p. 469).

Transcribing was executed using Office 365's browser transcription in Word, and audio files were re-played at normal and half speed where required so that precise replications of the dialogue could be recorded. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, the native or operational language of the informants, and transcriptions were therefore made in Norwegian. Names of the informants and the organisations they represented were removed from the transcriptions in order to ensure anonymity.

Transcriptions were then compared to the notes taken during the interviews, and areas which had any specific observations in the notes were marked on the transcripts.

5.4.2 Thematic Analysis – Codes and Themes

Transcriptions of the eight recorded interviews totalled 105 pages of script.

The next of the six steps in Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach is coding. The generation of codes begins after the researcher is familiar with the data set, and can begin to "tag" data which is relevant to the research question/s. Semantic rather than latent coding has been used for the interviews undertaken in this study, as it is assumed that the informants conveyed their meanings explicitly during the interviews conducted (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 10).

In order to facilitate the coding process and to gain a clearer overview of the data, the eight interview transcriptions were imported into NVivo. Initially I had envisaged a theoretical thematic analysis, whereby the data would be labelled with pre-defined codes, each to be placed into a theme reflecting one of my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83). It quickly became apparent however that it was not easy to arrange the data in this way, and new codes and themes were established in a more inductive approach. Of my initial codes, some were discarded whilst new codes emerged, and the data was finally condensed to ten codes and three themes; Evidence of Ability, Workplace Learning and Challenges with digital badges. The first two themes include codes and responses which are valid for both my main research question and the first two sub questions, whilst the third theme, as mentioned above, was directly related to my third research question. Data was exported from NVivo into an Excel document where quotes were registered by informant according to category, giving me an overview of the whole data set.

5.5 Reliability and Validity

Three criteria that must be considered when conducting social research are reliability, replication and validity (Bryman, 2016, p. 41). Reliability refers to consistency in research which, according to Bryman, is assessed on three key factors; stability over time, consistency in variables / indicators and consistency in interpretation (Inter-rater reliability), (2016, p. 157). In qualitative research, which focuses less on measurement and more on interpretation, external reliability concerns the degree to which a study can be replicated by another researcher, whilst internal reliability - or inter-rater consistency – is about the degree to which the research team agree on their findings (Bryman, 2016, p. 384). In order for a study to be replicable, transparency is an important factor, so throughout this research, I have explained my choices in order to clarify the process for the reader as much as possible. Throughout the interview process, we have been two researchers, and, as described above, we regularly conducted debriefs after interviews to discuss our perceptions of the informants' responses to align our interpretations of the data collected. Whilst the work of coding and analysing the data has been my solo work, my findings have been presented and discussed with both my co-researcher in Norway and other members of the Erasmus project, comparing results with the other countries. Where there have been disparities in the findings, I have re-checked my interviews to confirm that I had correctly understood both the context and the intention of the informant, thus aiming to heighten internal reliability (Silverman, 2017, p.397)

Whilst research may have high reliability, this does not necessarily mean that it also has validity. Bryman (2016, p. 383) refers to several interpretations of internal validity but the concept concerns whether, and to what extent, the empirical evidence provides a sufficient basis for the conclusions that are drawn from the research. To attain a high degree of validity, I have worked with the data in a structured way to ensure that the actual quotes collected during the interview process are represented in the findings and analysis, and that they are discussed in light of the theoretical perspectives that are presented in Chapter 4. A table has been included in Chapter 6 so that the reader can see the number of instances that each code was mentioned during interviews, in order to gain a better overview of the dataset. According to Silverman, this will not only give the reader a better insight into the data corpus, but will also allow the researcher the opportunity to test and revise generalisations they have made about the data set (2016, p. 396).

External and ecological validity are about whether the research conclusions can also apply to other studies / research groups and whether they can be generalised across social environments (Le Compte and Goetz in Bryman, p. 384). Generalisation can be problematic for qualitative research due to small sample sizes which mean that the results can be context-dependent and therefore not transferable to other settings (Bryman, 2016, p. 399). Although the sample size of the employer organisations interviewed in Norway was relatively small, it did encompass a range of stakeholders in different sectors – hospitality, grocery retail, cleaning, factory work, and facilities management. The organisations interviewed can be considered large actors in their specific sectors, and may therefore be considered representative of their respective industry sectors as a whole.

5.6 Ethical considerations

Implicit to social research is the requirement to adhere to ethical principles protecting the participants in the study. Bryman (2016, p. 125) cites Diener and Crandall's four areas for ethical consideration, which cover the topics of harm to participants, informed consent, invasion of privacy and whether deception is involved. An aspect closely linked to these topics is data protection, governed by the General Data Protection Regulation (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2018), ensuring that the confidentiality of informants is respected. As I planned to take audio recordings of the interviews, I obtained authorisation from NSD to process personal data prior to commencing the project (see Appendix 1). Following an initial e-mail invitation to participate in interviews, participants were then sent an e-mail with an Information letter about the project, including a consent form which informed them of how their personal details would be processed and of their right to withdraw their consent at any time without reason. (Appendix 2). Prior to starting the sound recording of each interview, I verbally checked that informants were still willing for me to audio record the dialogue. Sound recordings were saved and stored as described above (5.3.2) ensuring the protection of personal data and the anonymity of the participating individuals and organisations.

5.7 Preconceptions and reflexivity

A researcher has a responsibility to conduct research with honesty and integrity and do his utmost to ensure that objective considerations come before the researcher's preconceived conclusions. (Befring, 2015, s.30).

My own journey with digital badges began prior to the commencement of the Erasmus Plus project in 2020, when the application for the project was being written. I became familiar with the ways in which digital badges were being used in different contexts in other countries, and how similar Erasmus Plus projects were implementing badges in connection with so-called NEETS and other groups with a low connection to the labour market, work that is largely undocumented with research. In 2020, I undertook a literature study of empirical studies with digital badges, discussing the evidence presenting badges as a tool for recognition, motivation, and empowerment (Simonsen, 2020). Whilst the viability of badges as a passport into the labour market was discussed, I concluded that there was no evidence to either confirm or refute this hypothesis. My conclusion that more research was needed into the labour markets needs led, in part, to this study. In advance of the interviews I therefore had some prior knowledge of the global digital badge landscape, and I tried not to let this knowledge influence either the dialogues or the subsequent analysis.

The term reflexivity connotes that researchers should be reflective over the choices they make and acknowledge that these choices will influence their findings (Bryman, 2016, p. 388). Informants for this study were recruited using professional contacts made through my workplace which supplies training to their organisations, so I was very aware that interviews may be interpreted as a «sales pitch» for digital badges, something which would obviously affect the data collected. Although the project's aims were clearly stated in the Information letters and the consent declarations sent to all participants prior to interviews, I made a point of stating during the interviews that this was not an attempt to “sell” digital badges, but rather to gather information and insights for this thesis.

5.8 Methodological limitations

Whilst, as described above, I feel that the informants were representative of their respective sectors in the Norwegian labour market, it is important to note that labour market conditions, immigrant populations and social service provision vary between countries. It must therefore be concluded that the findings of the interviews in Norway are not transferable to a wider, international context, and similar research would need to be conducted in comparable contexts in other countries to prove the findings on a larger scale.

6.0 Empiri and analysis

The aim of this thesis is to research labour market perceptions of digital badges as a tool for including those with a weaker formal education background into the Norwegian workforce. By ascertaining which recruitment practices were standard for positions with no formal requirements, I aimed to explore both the perceived affordances of digital badges to employers either during the recruitment process or otherwise, and also any anticipated barriers to introducing such a system in an organisation.

In this chapter, the findings from my interviews are presented under the three main themes which emerged from the dialogues, shown in Table 2 below. The third column in the table notes the number of occurrences that each node was mentioned in the interviews.

Table 2.

Themes and nodes used in analysis

Theme	Node	Total References
Evidence of ability	- Relevant Experience	12
	- Documentation	10
	- References and personal attributes	35
	- Skills	25
Workplace learning	- Systemisation of training	14
	- Legitimacy	14
	- Motivate / Reward	25
Challenges with digital badges	- Reliability / Trust	17
	- Standardisation	9
	- Resources	20

Although it is problematic to compare the number of occurrences against each other as some categories were discussed in more depth, they are useful to gain an overview of the categories which were mentioned most and least for each of the themes (Silverman, 2016, p. 396). For

example, in the first theme “Evidence of Ability,” the topic which came up most in the dialogues was that of “References and personal attributes.”

As described in the previous chapter, the interviews were first coded and then codes were grouped into themes. The findings presented below primarily present the coded data from the interviews, however where background information is relevant, I have added explanations which have been taken from the detailed field notes which were written immediately following each interview.

As described in the previous chapter, I have two groups of informants: six employers (Informants 1 – 6) and three connector organisations (Informants 7 – 12). In this section, I distinguish between responses from the two groups. I use the terms job seekers and candidates interchangeably. Different organisations used different terminology in the interviews, however the meaning they conveyed with the different terms was the same. All employers when asked directly stated that they were mindful of diversity and inclusion in their recruitment practices, though one of the informants from a connector organisation commented they noticed that some employers with whom they worked were much better at this than others.

6.1 Evidence of ability

My first research question aimed to understand the kind of evidence which was required from job applicants during the recruitment process as a background for further discussion.

From the responses from my informants, I have differentiated between personal attributes and skills, two categories which were not always easy to define. I have taken “personal attributes” in the same category as references, as I understand personal attributes to mean the qualities which are inherent in a person; characteristics to which a referee may attest but which may be otherwise less easy to document. “Skills” I understand to be more tangible qualities, such as language ability or technical competence; things which have been learned through work, training or education and which can be quantified with a qualification, a course certificate, or an example.

6.1.1 Relevant experience

Most of the employer informants stated that prior experience was desirable for low-skilled positions with their organisation. This was reported irrespective of whichever sector the organisation operated within.

One employer informant estimated that candidates with relevant experience accounted for about 80% of the positions filled, and three of the other employers reiterated that they ideally look for candidates with relevant experience in the same sector or an associated branch. Informant 2 explained that candidates with experience in shop work generally “have a methodology,” but that it is unimportant where this retail experience has been acquired.

The connector organisations have a different focus from the employers, so experience was not a pre-requisite. Their function is to match candidates with relevant positions, or to give them training in the form of a work preparation course, thus giving them some practical experience. One informant spoke about a recent initiative whereby the organisation ran a course about building and construction as there were many jobseekers without a Tradesmen’s certificate who “... nevertheless had practical experience that makes them relevant for businesses, because companies in the traditional craft and production jobs lack qualified workers.” The informant continued to talk about organising internships for candidates so that they could gain experience of working life, either internally in her organisation, or with an external employer, intimating that work experience is the key for helping their jobseekers into the labour market.

6.1.2 Documentation of Formal Competence

During the interviews with the six employers, it emerged that, due to the difficult Post-Covid labour market, documentation of formal competence was not required in the interview process for jobs not requiring particular certification, and thus not a condition of employment. It was commented more than once that often applicants “barely have a CV” and Informant 3 expanded on the current paucity in the job market by saying “If you’ve got two arms and two legs, you’re capable. We need you.”

In response to a query about checking documentation as proof of competence, an employer informant encapsulated the general attitude when she explained:

Very little concerned with it. Don't really do it... the point is that if you want to have a higher salary, you have to document previous work experience, so it's kind of up to the employee to fix it. (...) and most people do, of course, because it makes quite a difference between the various salary levels.

In reply to the same question, another employer also raised the connection between documentation and a higher salary, however they acknowledged that this could be problematic for some of the target group:

We have many employees with foreign origins, and they often find it difficult to obtain documentation. Many have documentation of schools and experience in their own language. But in order for us to get it approved by our payroll department – to get salary calculated in relation to seniority - we have to have it translated, and that sometimes costs a bit of money. Getting it translated into English or Norwegian.

The quotes above refer more to being able to document **experience** rather than any form of formal qualification, which is an important finding from the interviews, reflecting the general finding that employers prefer candidates who have work experience. However, the quotes above also present the documentation of experience as being advantageous for the employee rather than as being a requirement for employment.

For jobs where some level of training or formal competence was desirable, the Tradesmen's Certificate was the preferred qualification. As expressed by one of the connector organisations:

Here, it has always been the tradition that the Tradesmen's Certificate has been the golden ticket into a job, and that's how it is, especially with the municipality. They don't employ people without a Tradesmen's Certificate or higher education, so

without these, you won't get a permanent position. And that is actually a problem.

[...] There are more and more demands for formal education, and fewer and fewer jobs you can get without.

This sentiment was echoed by Informant 11 who confirmed that, as a connector organisation, they invest in getting jobseekers through the Tradesmen's Certificate because "...in the future one ought to have that [a Tradesmen's Certificate] to show or it's easy to end up in the NAV [Norwegian Welfare] system."

When informants were questioned whether they would accept a digital badge as documentation of competence, there were various answers which will be largely discussed in section 6.3. One response which is however relevant for the documentation of competence, was that a digital badge issued from a school or university would be more credible and valuable as it would be considered "more official" than a digital badge issued by an individual or an employer.

6.1.3 References and Personal attributes

Responses regarding checking references for jobseekers were mixed. Only two of the informants among employers conducted reference checks, one of them asserting that they would follow up references regardless so as to check on the character of a potential employee, and the other stating:

There's much you can cut down on but don't take shortcuts on checking references.

They are important, because it's one thing to show the competence you have there, in that moment, but you want a second opinion about who this person really is behind all this competence...

Informant 1 admitted that they didn't have capacity to check references, whilst Informant 3 said that whilst organisational procedures stated that they must check references, in practice this didn't happen for "lower positions."

The connector organisations did their own mapping and assessment of candidates, with NAV putting the responsibility of reference checks onto the employer. With regards to the reliability of references, Informant 11 commented that referees for job seekers with a low attachment to working life were often people in the same situation, weakening the credibility of their reference. However, he also asserted:

References aren't worth so much really, and anyone who has worked with recruitment over time knows that all it tells is how a candidate performed at *that* time with *that* manager. [...] With the kind of candidates we're talking about here, I tell them that references aren't decisive in the hiring process, neither one way or the other.

Whilst references seemed not to be a significant factor in the recruitment process, personal attributes appeared to be overwhelmingly important. As one employer said "Many of our managers say that experience isn't so important – things can be learnt. But that a person is positive, has resilience and suchlike...these things are clearly more valuable." This was echoed by an informant from a connector organisation who referred to these kinds of attributes as an individual's "personality" which they bring with them into work.

The attributes which were viewed as the most important by both employers and connector organisations were a positive attitude, motivation and a will to work, attributes which were mostly identified at interview, rather than through a referee. According to the connector organisations, employers were looking for candidates who turn up on time, who could collaborate with others, were reliable and whom they could trust. The connector organisations elaborated more on these types of attributes than the employer informants themselves, one of them commenting on how these personal abilities are difficult to read from a CV.

6.1.4 Skills

As clarified in the introduction to this section, I understand skills to be - at least to some degree – quantifiable and documentable. That a jobseeker can drive (and holds a valid

licence) is one such example of a skill that was preferred by one of the employer organisations.

For both employers and connector organisations, the most common skill requirement was that of language ability – preferably in Norwegian, but alternatively in English. One employer explained that Norwegian or English-speaking staff were an expectation from their clients, and another highlighted that in times of downsizing, it was the staff with low language skills which were made redundant first, irrespective of seniority, as these were employees who couldn't be assigned to alternative positions as required. Establishment of language ability seems to be mainly ascertained at interview rather than through documentation of level, as Informant 11 clarified:

When a jobseeker comes and says they can speak at B1 level, that's not worth much to me until I've spoken with them. [...] If they've been on a course, you know what they have covered but anyway if they're going into a sector where there is occupation-specific Norwegian that is required, it's not certain that they are at "B" level in that vocabulary.

The implication in the quote above is that a course completion certificate or documentation does not give an adequate indication of a candidate's "working" language ability, and that both employers and connector organisations prefer to check language skills within a relevant context rather than general ability. The acceptance of English as a lingua franca was to some degree dependent on geographical location. As informants from one connector organisation discussed during the interview:

In Oslo, there is generally greater acceptance for candidates with less experience and an alternative background, and they kind of get that English can function as the language... not just that Norwegian must be perfect. But when you come here to

[district name], I notice much bigger challenges with this, particularly when you get out in the villages, so to speak.

Many of the employers interviewed offered sponsored language courses to their employees, but Informant 6 acknowledged that the language problem was difficult to solve, as participation on a course did not guarantee success. She observed however that foreign employees who did well on the language courses “got a better quality of life. Because they understand their colleagues in a completely different way.”

Digital skills were cited as a usual requirement with some of the employers, however due to the lack of applicants post-pandemic, this was overlooked and staff were provided with any necessary training instead. This finding implies that digital competence is not a prioritised requirement at the current time, but that it could be a potential barrier to working life in a stronger labour market.

Other sought-after abilities from the employers which I have categorised as skills were flexibility, initiative, independence and adaptability. Whilst it may be argued that these are personal attributes, I contend that whilst they may be to some degree inherent, they are attributes which come to light through learning about or experiencing a situation, and are therefore a result of experiential learning. One employer informant considers these skills to be culturally bound or learned:

It's actually social studies, yes. What does a Norwegian employer expect from you?

And I have talked to NAV about this so many times, in relation to those we have on courses with us. Or those who we get on internships. They need to be a little prepared that there is no point in standing with your hands in your pockets and waiting to be told that you have to do this and that all the time. You are expected to take the initiative. You are expected to be your own manager. You are expected to be self-motivating in a way.

In terms of future competence needs, “human skills” were cited by several as something that would be necessary. Informant 5 predicted that the organisation’s biggest investments in the coming years will be in human capital. Due to increased automation, the company requires workers with problem solving and critical thinking skills who can not only work the machines, but can work autonomously to fix problems as required. An employer from a different sector also cited automation as an influence on competency requirements, explaining:

We have had a big focus on service mindedness for several years, and if things become more automated, it’s clear that this will become even more important. That human contact that you have in your role as receptionist... it will count more and show that you really are helpful.

From the connector organisations, Informant 11 supported this view saying that he believed that future competence needs will be a parallel requirement with soft skills like motivation, collaboration and flexibility forming one side of the equation, whilst the labour market simultaneously will demand more formal competence, a point elaborated on in subchapter 6.1.2. Other future-oriented skills which were mentioned were better technological skills (Informants from the production sector) and digital competence to be able to use the ever-increasing number of digital work surfaces (Informants from retail, hospitality and cleaning).

In this section, I have discussed aspects of the recruitment processes for jobs which have no formal competency requirements. From my informants, I ascertained that documents to prove formal competence were never routinely checked, and that documents to prove work experience were only required to secure a higher salary based on seniority. It was found that references held different degrees of credibility for the informants, irrespective of whether they were employers or connector organisations, and that personal attributes were mostly identified during an interview. Personal attributes were more important than skills, however knowledge of Norwegian or English was desirable, and language level was ascertained at interview, rather than by documentation. All informants thought that “human skills” would be important in the future, particularly to balance the automation in many service industries, and that

critical thinking and problem-solving skills would be needed to a higher degree to manage technological advances in industrial food production.

6.2 Achievement at work

This section which I have termed “achievement at work”, will present informants’ responses in relation to the ways in which they suggest digital badges may be useful for their organisations. Whilst achievement at work was not directly covered in my research questions, this theme emerged during the thematic analysis as one of the roles which employers envisaged for digital badges.

As ascertained from the first section in this chapter, it seemed that there was little necessity for digital badges in the recruitment process – apart from a few specific proposals which will be discussed below. This section will be divided into three parts; systemisation of learning in the workplace, legitimacy of training provided and motivation and rewards at work, all discussed in consideration of digital badges.

6.2.1 Systemisation

Of the employer organisations, all informants stated that their organisation offered training programmes for their employees. Some of the organisations offered onboarding courses or modular onboarding courses which new recruits worked through online, whilst others had informal onboarding processes, which were run on an ad hoc basis, with training occurring locally with local managers.

One similarity between all but one of the employer organisations was the lack of any easily accessible overview of the training completed. The organisation which was the exception had implemented a training platform in 2021, so all employee training and onboarding was registered and documented from there, but the other employer organisations all commented on a lack of systemisation. Several of the informants viewed digital badges as a way of keeping an overview of learning and competence. As Informant 6 explained “It’s not been so easy to remember who has been on which course. Who’s done infection prevention, who’s done the machine course, who’s done hand hygiene. All the different things we do...” She continued with a suggestion that systemisation of courses would both benefit the employer and the employee by serving as documentation of their assumed competence based on their course completion. If an employee pleaded that they couldn’t complete a task due to a lack of

training, a structured system for course completion and validation would be able to document whether the individual had actually undergone training in this area. Another employer also saw the benefits of having an overview of competencies present in the staff, suggesting that digital badges would be especially valuable for employees who aren't so good at speaking up for themselves, or those who struggle with writing. Giving visibility to competencies would, he said, benefit both employer and the employee, as more skills would make the employee more attractive to the organisation.

The informant from the organisation who had already implemented a system considered that an overview of learning was positive for employees and that digital badges could make their learning more visible to them “Oh, I'm on this level, I've got to do that one (module) next, and that one (module) there is completed.”

From the responses given in this area, there seems to be a lack of clarity for the employers between a learning management system (LMS) and a digital badge system. Most LMS solutions offer a plug-in for awarding digital badges, however the intention behind digital badges in itself is to accredit and validate achievement rather than to simply provide an overview of course attendance and completion.

6.2.2 Legitimacy

The idea of giving a kind of legitimacy or formality to in-house training was one of the topics raised by some of the employers I interviewed. One employer considered the idea of digital badges useful for internal courses particularly if an external body could “quality control” the course content and award the badges. This informant felt that this would add credibility to their internal courses, and would be a strong form of quality assurance in an annual audit where the organisation must document staff training.

Another employer also raised the idea of digital badges to signify quality: “As an employer, if there is anything here to get out of digital badges, it must be that they are a seal of quality – they must be a way of showing that our internal courses have good quality.”

Of the connector organisations, the focus was more on giving legitimacy to the candidates and the potential of digital badges was seen for documenting competencies that candidates developed in internships. As Informant 7 clarified:

The first thing I thought about digital badges was that this was very smart - that you get proof of informal competence. [...] In the case of internships, I thought that this would make the job consultants more aware. What is important to *get across* about this job seeker?

She explained that whilst they would normally get a kind of internship certificate, they didn't get anything more specific, and that, following the internship, it would be the job consultant who would present the candidate to potential employers. Digital Badges could therefore be a way of documenting the personal attributes or skills that a candidate exhibited as an intern. One of the connector organisation informants saw that digital badges would be a way of "selling" their candidates to employers. In her view, a digital badge from their organisation would give candidates some legitimacy in their job applications, as they would be "certified" by the organisation, irrespective of which part of the country they moved to. Her colleague continued:

When our candidates are finished on our courses, they're right out in the job market, and usually they don't have anything to show, except maybe a reference from us about how they have performed on the course. But if they got a digital badge for it... that would be a plus!

Although Informant 7 was positive towards digital badges, she did however caution that

It could be a danger that if you have very many badges on your CV, it may signify that you have lots of gaps in your formal education. One needs to be careful that digital badges don't become a label signifying that the candidate only has informal competence!

In terms of legitimacy, the responses from employer informants and connector organisation informants came from slightly different perspectives. The employers acknowledged that digital badges could offer a formality and legitimacy to their internal training programmes, whereas the connector organisations thought more that digital badges they issued would give a legitimacy to their job seekers. It was however also voiced that too many digital badges may negatively impact a job-seeker by indicating a lack of formal competence, thus undermining the value of any informal competence they do possess.

6.2.3 Motivation

Through recognition of their work and by raising individuals' awareness of their own abilities, all of the organisations interviewed believed that digital badges would be motivational for their employees or candidates.

Several informants mentioned that attendance was a problem in the organisation, with one employer believing that giving a badge to employees with low absenteeism would give a signal effect to others. Another informant saw badges as something which could empower employees and give them something they could be proud of:

I imagine that they have like a Scout sash with badges. And they can say to each other 'I've been here five years, and I've got seven badges. But you're new, so you've just got the one.'

Several informants believed that badges could be used effectively throughout the whole organisation – not just for lower skilled jobs. As one employer said:

I think it would be good to recognise employees a bit more. There are very many who do a lot of good things in the different departments, but they're not always easy to see and everyone just knows that everyone in the organisation is so busy. But we could get a bit more insight into what other people are doing... Yes, to create some common understanding and boost people a bit. [...] There could be a better unity. And not least motivational.

This suggests that digital badges could help staff to be more aware of each other's achievements, thus creating a more supportive working environment. The informant suggested that digital badges for minor achievements such as meeting a deadline could be very motivating.

Of the connector organisations, one informant thought awarding digital badges from prior learning could be very beneficial to candidates, as most are unaware of the competences they have. She recounted that when candidates get help from a job consultant to describe their informal skills, which then became 'key competencies' on their CV, "... it does something to both their motivation and their belief in themselves." She thought that the visualisation of skills with a digital badge would raise self-awareness and give a feeling of empowerment to those with a low attachment to working life.

Giving digital badges as a reward was also brought up by some of the employers. As Informant 6 said:

To take it even further... We have these big department meetings. I'm saying this because I know my workers, right? Because I know they need a lot of motivation. Many of them are not very good in Norwegian, so they need extra motivation, and if we could have a presentation ceremony where we make a big deal out of it and announce that they've earned a digital badge...

Whilst clearly the reward could just as easily be a certificate rather than a digital badge, the informant thought that being able to recognise smaller achievements with badges was a definite benefit. She indicated that her staff needed constant encouragement, so being able to give a visual token of appreciation for good work or completed courses - however small - would help with the positive reinforcement that she maintained her workers required.

From a different perspective, one employer asserted that badges on a job application would indicate a candidate who was forward thinking and up to date with trends, which would be received positively as a sign of a motivated job seeker.

This section has outlined the key uses that the informants suggested for digital badges. Systemisation of employee training was mentioned by several of the informants, particularly the idea of getting an overview of staff competency. However, as noted above, this is a limited - and perhaps inaccurate -view of what the digital badge concept can offer. Imparting legitimacy to internal courses was a valid suggestion made by several informants, whilst the motivational potential of digital badges was noted by all, with the possibility of empowering individuals by raising their awareness of their own competences.

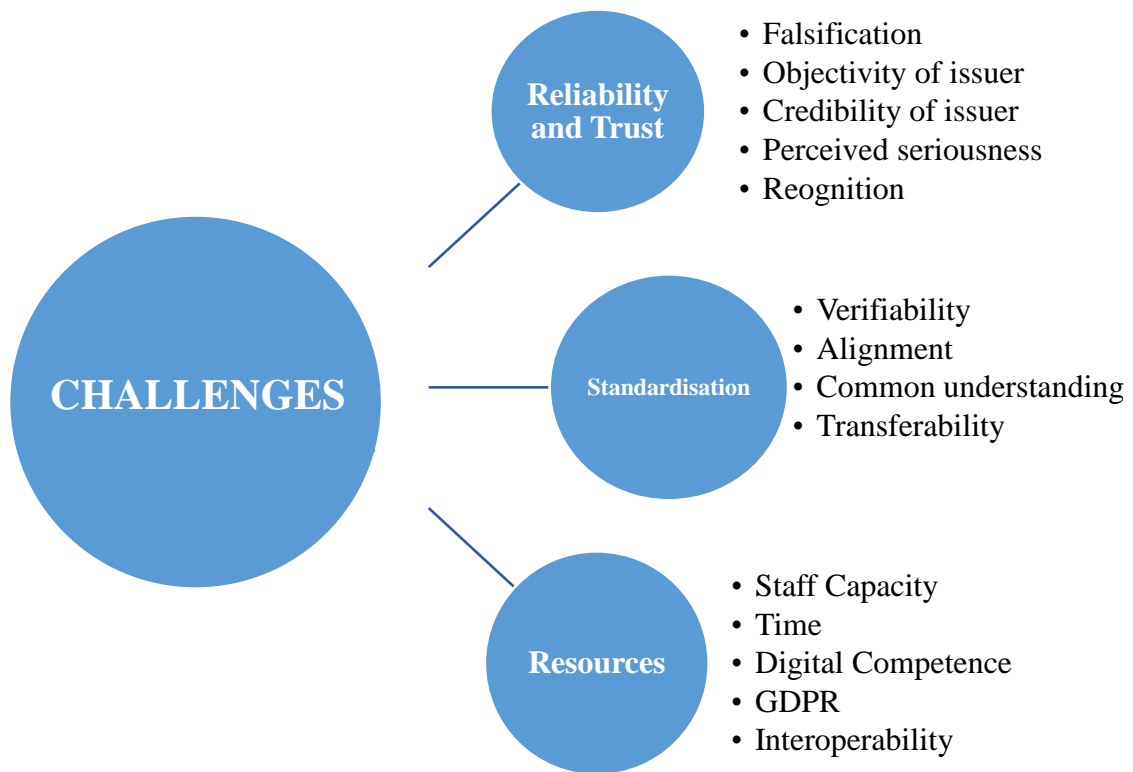
6.3 Challenges

During the course of the interviews, I aimed to ascertain any barriers that the informants envisaged with digital badges. As well as discussing any impediments to implementation of digital badges in their organisations, I also wished to uncover any more general reservations about the digital badge concept. The three main categories which emerged were Reliability and Trust, Standardisation, and Resources. “Reliability and Trust” focussed on apprehensions about whether a digital badge could be trusted to be a real and fair indication of a candidate’s competence in a given area, particularly in light of the fact that open digital badges can be issued by anyone. “Standardisation” faced concerns about alignment between badges that are awarded by different issuers, and how they could be compared in terms of content and value. “Resources” was more focused on the problems that were anticipated if the informant were to introduce digital badges within their own organisation.

These themes and their associated categories are illustrated in Figure 3 on the next page.

Figure 3.

Perceived Challenges with Digital Badges



6.3.1 Reliability and Trust

In the responses about reliability and trust, there was little difference between the employer organisations and the connector organisations. The issue of falsification was raised and questions about whether badges could be falsified in the same way as paper documentation. However, the main comments about reliability and trust were around the “open” nature of a digital badge system. As one employer said “The first thing I think about - I mean, ... can one *trust* these badges if anyone can make them and issue them?”

An informant from NAV voiced the same concerns about reliability when there were many badge issuers “[...] particularly when it comes down to things like attendance on internships and the reliability of individuals. I think that there need to be some kind of frames or boundaries for who can issue badges.” For another connector organisation, it was a question of “Who gets to decide on whether people have these skills or not? Who gets to play God?” These comments all reflect a mistrust of a system whereby badges can be issued

indiscriminately, and they indicate that the credibility of a badge is to a large extent dependent on its issuer, rather than what it represents. One informant from a connector organisation was concerned that if there was not enough control over how badges are issued, any misuse would immediately impact the credibility of digital badges generally.

Issuing badges for personal attributes was also a problematic area because of subjectivity. As one employer pointed out:

[...] it's a kind of profiling or labelling, especially if you're going to give badges for someone being kind and nice and pleasant and service-minded. Because then somebody may disagree, and say "Well I want a badge because I've been really pleasant and nice all the time" and then it's just "No, you weren't" ...

She continued that even badging for participation on a course was problematic, as the level of engagement on the course or workshop may have varied greatly between the participants, thus attendance could – or should - be evaluated in different degrees. One person may be simply physically present for training, whilst his colleague may not only be present, but actively contribute to the benefit of other attendees.

A further concern voiced by Informant 7 was of the "seriousness" of digital badges as a means of validation. She recounted her experiences with a well-known and widely used App for language learning where she earned digital badges for minor achievements, which she described as "Just nonsense. They bear no relation to my language skills. It's just a cheap trick to hold up the motivation!"

Linked to the perceived validity of digital badges is recognition. Informants from both employer and connector organisations commented that the concept of digital badges needs to be better known and promoted in Norway. Informant 7 mused that employers would just look at a badge and say "Yes, that's interesting, but we have to do it properly, right?" As an employee in a connector organisation, she was particularly concerned that digital badges must be recognised, understood and trusted by employers in order for them to have any value. One of the employers concluded that a deeper understanding and some examples or references

from organisations where digital badges are already in use would be the first step for her organisation if they were to consider digital badges as a means of validation.

6.3.2 Standardisation

Many informants were sceptical about the transparency of badges, and about how a badge issued by one organisation could be compared with an equivalent badge issued by a different organisation. As deliberated by one employer, verifiability was problematic, as different organisations within the same branch had different training courses, presumably with differing content and quality, and if both offered a badge, it would not be certain that the trainee had covered the same curriculum or achieved the same depth of training. Another employer suggested that it would be useful to have badges which could be used sector-wide and that it could make the recruitment process easier if a candidate came from another shop with digital badges as proof of competence.

From the connector organisations, Informant 7 felt that standardisation was critical because it was important that everyone “did things in the same way,” however another informant asserted that “As long as we can easily click into the badge to see the criteria...that’s what is important.”

6.3.3 Resources

Concerns with resources were mainly connected with work capacity in the organisations, particularly in administration and human resources. Time pressures were the most common issue amongst the employer informants. As one employer said:

The thing that’s a bit of a challenge here is that everyone is so enormously busy, and regardless of what you initiate, you always fear that you can’t manage to deliver. The same applies to training...Yes, we do training. But whether we can systemise it, I’m not too sure about. It’s because of the time pressure – constant time pressure. And when it comes to badges, they sound like a very smart idea for us, but I fear it will be just another thing that people can’t manage. Or prioritise. That’s always a worry here.

We introduce a lot of new programmes, but everyone is so unbelievably busy that it gets difficult to follow up...

Several of the employers mentioned multiple systems that employees were expected to master, so any new system that would require an investment of time from the employees was problematic. One informant was concerned about the level of digital competence amongst the lower-skilled employees as 10% of the employees in his organisation were unable to log on to the organisation's in-house online courses. This made him unsure that employees would manage to download a Badge Wallet App and make a profile in order to claim and store their badges, and he surmised that they would need support for this.

The costs involved with initiating a badge system were a factor which was mentioned, but did not seem to pose too much of an issue, even for the municipality employer. Informant 6 clarified "[Name] Municipality has digitalisation as our flag, our banner. We're digitalising everything and we want to be ahead in digital development." She did however point out that to get anything authorised in the municipality was a long and time-consuming process, particularly if implementation was to involve all of the departments in the municipality.

Questions with data protection were brought up by one employer organisation and the Norwegian Labour & Welfare Service. Informant 3 mused "...if we as an organisation should use badges, the GDPR light flashes at once. Certainly, in the case of soft skills. It's very GDPR problematic... it's nearly like a kind of profiling."

Whilst Informants from NAV described the GDPR problem at length, also giving some examples of how GDPR was especially problematic for them, interoperability with other systems in use seemed to pose the biggest problem:

We have very strict rules about this [getting jobseekers' consent] and we can only use the system solution that we have today, as it's connected to Altinn* and all of the documentation has to be in there and protected with Bank ID and all that.

*Altinn is an internet portal used by the public and private sectors in communication with individuals

This section has presented the challenges which were raised by the employers and the connector organisations. Whilst there were some concerns about implementing badges within organisations, these did not seem to be insurmountable problems. The more pressing concerns seemed to be about reliability and trusting that a badge was an objective evaluation, accurately representative of a candidate's abilities.

6.4 Findings in relation to expectation

The research on the Erasmus Plus project has already ascertained that an important factor for the success of digital badges is recognition from organisations where individuals may need to showcase their skills (BadgEurope 2022). Previous studies have shown that employers' awareness of digital badges and micro-credentials is very limited and the labour market remains to be persuaded of the value of digital badges as an attestation of competence (Perkins & Pryor, 2021, p. 34). Whilst the Norwegian organisations I interviewed were unanimously positive to the idea of digital badges, none of them had encountered digital badges previously, and they felt that they needed more information to be able to fully understand the concept and the affordances and implications which digital badges might bring.

Whilst the limited research available from employers shows that they would be interested in using digital badges to complement traditional forms of educational certification during the recruitment process (i.e Raish & Rimland, 2016, Perkins & Pryor, 2021), the employers in my research viewed the main benefit of badges to be the validation of in-house training and professional development. To some extent this also applied to the connector organisations, however their focus was more towards giving their candidates a tool which would facilitate their entry into a job. This was an interesting finding as the connector organisations are of course supplying candidates to the employers, and these same employers were less interested in digital badges at the recruitment stage.

7.0 Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss my findings in light of the theoretic perspectives presented in Chapter four: credentialism and work motivation. My findings will also be discussed against research on digital badges, and literature and research concerning the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway.

The statistics indicate that entering working life is more difficult for those with a low level of education, particularly in times of hardship. As Brown asserts (2001, p.19), formal credentials play a significant role in the educational system and, increasingly, in accessing working life, with even craftsmen generally requiring a formal vocational certificate (Alfsen et al., 2020, p. 44). The educational level in Norway is ever escalating and the number of Bachelor's degrees awarded annually between 2011 and 2021 in Norway increased by 36% from 24 603 to 33 502, whilst the number of Masters degrees also increased to 16 967, an increase of 56% in the same period (SSB, 2022). However, statistics consistently indicate that more adults in Norway participate in non-formal learning than informal learning. In 2018, the number of adults (over 22 years) taking part in non-formal education was 25% higher than those receiving formal education (NOU 2019: 12, s.191). Figures from 2021 indicate that 55% of all adults between 20 and 66 years (excluding students) participated in non-formal education, whilst 25% participated in formal education (SSB, 2022). One of the original proposals for open digital badges was the suggestion that they could complement formal credentials by capturing and displaying granular skills and learning that occurs outside of formal education (Mozilla et al., 2011).

In starting this research, I aimed to find out whether digital badges could have any value as a tool to facilitate inclusion in the labour market by making visible an individual's non-formal and informal skills and competence. Previous reports have shown that the validation processes for informal and non-formal learning in Norway are inadequate, and that information about gaining credit for previous learning is not widely available, particularly for those with a limited knowledge of Norwegian (Alfsen et al., 2020, p. 68). Digital badges, due to their open nature, are more accessible as they can be issued by any organisation in recognition of an individual's skills, competence or achievement, thereby eliminating the

need for the individual to apply for recognition through a third party. According to Olsen and colleagues (2018, p.148), validation of workplace learning and training is also often poorly documented, with many organisations acknowledging that this is an area which needs systemisation. The current method of validation of prior learning only allows for competences to be validated against skills which are in the curriculum for formal education at a given level. This can be problematic, as some skills and competences which have been gained in working life may not be easy to align. For a digital badge, it is the badge issuer who specifies the necessary criteria for attainment of that, which means that a badge can be awarded for skills which are not in alignment with learning outcomes in the Norwegian National Qualifications Framework.

Whilst this thesis primarily aims to ascertain whether digital badges can be used as means of documenting an individual's skills to facilitate inclusion in the labour market, my findings confirm that the theme is actually much broader, concerning not only the means of validation, but also the question of how to establish trust, transparency and acceptance for any validation system for non-formal and informal competence.

7.1 Entry to working life – what are employers looking for?

For all of the employers, work experience was the most sought-after characteristic in job-seekers, and of the six employer interviews conducted, none of the informants checked educational documentation for applicants to positions which did not have a formal requirement. The level of schooling was apparently unimportant, and experience and personal attributes weighed much more heavily on hiring decisions for low skilled positions than did any kind of formal credentials. These findings correspond with those presented by Olsen and colleagues, who concluded that employers undertake evaluations of non-formal and informal competence during the recruitment process, but that these assessments are based on CVs and references, and are not documented (2018, p. 155).

The most important skill for the employers in my study was that of language which was evaluated at interview, with one informant stating that they would not trust a course certificate as proof of language ability, preferring to check it themselves. Lack of language skills is therefore clearly an inhibitor for a percentage of the target group to gain access to working

life, even in low level positions where it may be assumed that language is not important. An informant from one of the connector organisations commented that in her experience employers were not very knowledgeable about the amount of competence indicated by the levels in the Common European Framework for Reference of Language, which indicates that employers may feel that a dialogue can provide better insight into language skills than a credential. This suggests that the employers in the study are much more concerned with *demonstrated* competence than *documented* competence, and, whilst poor language skills will negatively affect interview outcome, there is no evidence that credentials are used as a barrier to exclude those without formal schooling from low skilled positions.

As two of the main theories which concern the presumed benefits of educational attainment, I chose to use credentialism and human capital theory to discuss the findings from my interviews. Whilst human capital theory maintains that school produces skills that are relevant and necessary for the work place, credential theorist Collins (2019, p.25) postulates that what is learnt in school has more to do with “conventional standards of sociability and propriety than with instrumental and cognitive skills”, thus giving educational credentials a more cultural weight. Collins (2019, p. 43) suggests that employers view proof of education as a means of selecting employees with “desirable, (middle-class)” attributes. Neither of these theories seems particularly pertinent to gaining access to working life in Norway, as none of the employers in my study were interested in formal educational credentials, with candidates’ motivation and their desire to work being of primary concern. These attributes were evaluated at interview, and it is difficult to see that a formal credential (or a digital badge) would have any impact on the recruitment outcome. Indeed, in a study of employers hiring at different levels in a range of sectors, Bills (1988, p.444) found few informants who relied solely on educational background as an indicator of competence.

Particularly in the case of low-skilled workers, it can be suggested that the theories of credentialism and human capital theory do not adequately cover the decisions that are made during recruitment processes, as these theories concern documented schooling rather than documentation of other competences that an individual may possess. Much of the literature concerning hiring decisions centres around graduate and higher-level recruitment, with Pryor & Perkins (2021, p. 31) observing that “generic skills & competencies for the workplace” rather than the specific degree subject were of most importance to graduate employers,

suggesting that recruitment for skilled positions is more affected by credentialism than for lower skilled jobs.

Interestingly, the skills which employers felt would be most useful for their organisations in the next five years were in alignment with the Norwegian report on Future Competence Needs, with several informants anticipating that they would need to change their hiring requirements for low-skilled workers (NOU 2020:2, s.15). Whilst “human skills” would grow in importance, there would, they predicted, be an increased need for technical and digital competence. Several of the informants indicated that the Tradesman’s Certificate would be preferred, thereby increasing the entry requirements for lower skilled jobs to include formal credentials. However, in the context of these vocational qualifications, it is undoubtedly the *content* of the qualification which is viewed as important, rather than the implied attributes of the job-seeker, as suggested by credential theorists such as Collins.

According to Bills (1988, p. 446), formal credentials are less important in the case of internal hiring, or promotion, as the employer has had the opportunity to observe the employee in practice. Most of the employers I interviewed mentioned the possibility for internal promotion for staff who showed potential, indicating that they “handpicked” staff who were competent. These employees were offered the chance to participate on courses to increase their competency, most of which led to formal qualifications which were respected and acknowledged within the sector. This opportunity to increase skills through training is in line with the human capital position that an individual’s productive capacity can be increased through education and training (Becker, 1993, p. 19). Promotion of staff was not dependent on educational credentials, but rather on their displayed capability in the job, and employees were offered training courses in recognition of performance. Some employers claimed that many of their management positions were recruited internally, supporting the National Skills Strategy’s pledge to mobilise, strengthen and utilise competence already in the workforce (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 8).

In conclusion, neither human capital theory nor credentialism seem to be relevant for hiring practices for low skilled positions in post-pandemic Norway; schooling has neither a direct nor an implied effect. Collins (2019, p. 27) claims credentials are a cultural currency and that the certification value of a degree (or other formal qualification) indicates to an employer

something about the personality attributes of a candidate. From my research, however, a lack of formal credentials does not seem to prove a barrier to entering the labour force for low level positions, and applicants' personal attributes and skills are rather discerned at interview than by an assumption based on their educational background, as suggested by credential theorists.

According to my employer informants, opportunities for professional development and promotion are available to employees who prove themselves competent, irrespective of their previous education level, indicating that once one has gained access to the workforce, credentialism is in any case not relevant.

7.2 Skills validation in the workplace: potential roles for Digital Badges

As my findings above indicate, formal credentials and documentation do not seem to play a role in the recruitment process for lower skilled jobs. However, employers' interest in badges as documentation of training and professional development within the workplace was more evident.

The acknowledgement that skills development for their employees was increasingly important to ensure a sustainable and competitive business was apparent in nearly all of the employer organisations. As outlined in the National Skills Strategy, not only is workplace training important, but better systems to document the learning that takes place in the workplace are also required. Improved methods for documenting competence will not only benefit employees by making their skills more visible, it will also afford organisations a more accessible overview of the business' competence profile and development opportunities, thereby improving service, production or productivity (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 19).

The European Commission (2022, p. 4) suggests that micro-credentials could help certify the outcomes of small, tailored learning experiences, allowing individuals to fill skills gaps they need to succeed in the fast-changing labour market. However, systemisation of informal competences acquired in the workplace is problematic due to the heterogeneity of working life (Olsen et al., 2018, p. 150).

The introduction of a digital badge system to accredit workplace training was viewed from several perspectives, and the affordances that were mentioned were considered from both employers' and employees' perspectives.

7.2.1 Overview of competence and legitimisation of training

Olsen and colleagues (2018, p. 144) suggest that larger organisations may have a more restricted overview of employees' competence and also report that the companies most interested in a system for documentation of competence are those employing individuals with low formal competence. My findings indicated that gaining a clear overview of employees' competence was high on the list of perceived advantages for employers, with affordances they cited including better use of employees' competence; "evidence" of completed training in disputes with employees, and adherence to industry regulations (for example in the use of chemical cleaning products). Whilst digital badges can fill this function, this shows that there is some lack of understanding around the digital badge concept and the wider benefits of digital badges, a finding which was also reported from employer research conducted by Perkins and Pryor (2016, p.34).

In addition to systemisation, the legitimisation of internal courses was also one of the roles that employers envisaged for digital badges, giving both quality assurance and credibility to internal workplace training. An annual survey of NHO's member organisations concerning the need for a system for validating competence found that 12% of organisations felt a strong necessity for such a system, particularly organisations which needed to document their employees' competence, for example to win tenders or to satisfy governmental regulations (Olsen et al., 2018, p. 142). From my findings, it was mainly employers who needed to evidence training to, for example, sector auditors, who were interested in a legitimisation of workplace training.

Responses from the connector organisations were in accordance with employers, however, here digital badges were viewed as a way of legitimising, or formalising, non-formal learning and granular skills that were evidenced during internships, in order to provide job seekers with evidence of their skills to show potential employers. Legitimation would be of the candidate as a resource, rather than of a legitimisation of training, and as such could be likened to a reference.

Although not a perspective expressed by any of the informants, the recognition of employee competence with a digital badge could also have negative consequences for the organisation, in that it may strengthen the employees' value and bargaining power, leading to expectations

of higher pay or promotion. Recognition may also bolster an employee's attractiveness in the labour market, opening up opportunities with other employers. However, it seems that the benefits to an organisation far outweigh the drawbacks and employers were generally positive to recognising digital badges issued by other actors in the same sector, considering that this would simplify recruitment. According to Becker (1993, p. 45), investment in specific on-the-job training offers increases in productivity to organisations, and Olsen and colleagues reported that it seems unlikely that employers would be willing to invest resources in documenting employees' competence if there was no value in it for them (2018, p. 148).

7.2.2 Digital badges for motivation and reward

Whilst using digital badges to gain an overview over an individual's competence was deemed to be an affordance for the organisations, all of the informants saw this as also beneficial to individuals, giving them a clearer picture of their current competences, and potentially indicating the next steps for progression. Much of the literature discussing the pedagogy of digital badges highlights the possibility of creating learning paths, whereby badge earners (or employees) can structure their learning or accomplishments according to their own strengths or goals (i.e. Gamrat & Zimmerman, 2021, p.2619). According to Ryan & Deci, (2017, p. 18), structure is important as a scaffold for competence, in turn complementing autonomy support and fostering self- motivation and persistence.

A number of different uses for digital badges were suggested by my informants, from documenting attendance on a course or internship to the completion of a Tradesman's Certificate. Some of the suggestions were for relatively small achievements, such as low absenteeism or for meeting a deadline, whilst others suggested greater accomplishments, such as the successful completion of a course or training programme. The connector organisations were more focussed on personal attributes exhibited during internships, but also considered digital badges appropriate for the completion of components of "preparation for working life" courses. All of the informants believed that their employees and job seekers would be motivated by receiving a digital badge, as it would not only give them recognition for their competence, but would also raise self-awareness of skills.

Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 532) recognise that workplace engagement is driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, but suggest that organisations which try to facilitate intrinsic

motivation will enhance employees' need satisfaction. According to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation and subsequent psychological well-being are determined by the degree to which the universal needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017. P.10). Bandura's self-efficacy theory also posits self-belief and the experience of competence as an important prerequisite for engagement and motivation (Bandura, 1977). Individuals need to experience mastery, and it can be speculated that awarding a digital badge could enhance an employee's experience of aptitude as they receive an acknowledgement of their competence. That digital badges may be used to validate smaller achievements means that they can be adapted for any level in the organisation, and goals can be made manageable so that all employees have the chance to earn a digital badge and experience mastery. This may be particularly relevant for lower-skilled employees as it may enhance their experience of self-worth, a point which several informants elaborated on.

According to self-efficacy theory, prior experiences are an influential factor in an individual's expectation of success, so for those with little formal schooling, awarding smaller achievements may give individuals confidence, whereas larger qualifications may seem daunting or unmanageable. One employer commented that many employees drop out before completion of their Tradesman's certificate, and considered that smaller credit units, such as digital badges, might motivate them to complete the course. Whilst a Tradesman's Certificate is a formal vocational qualification, it was suggested that the acknowledgement of smaller units of learning throughout the training, as digital badges facilitate for, can help trainees better visualise their progression, with achievement being recognised regularly rather than only at the summation of the four-year programme.

Some informants suggested that badges would give a "signal effect" to other employees, not only giving badge earners something to be proud of, but also showing their colleagues that such an accolade is attainable, a suggestion which is supported by self-efficacy theory, in which vicarious experiences are an influencing factor for self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). Another element of self-efficacy theory is verbal persuasion, particularly when it is given by those deemed as credible or trustworthy. One employer felt that making accomplishments more visible within the organisation could help to create common understanding and unity between staff, something which may be assumed to lead to encouragement and praise from co-workers. In the terminology of self-determination theory,

this could be regarded as fulfilment of the need for relatedness, strengthening the bond between employees, and in turn contributing towards shaping a supportive organisational culture. A digital badge would also signal official recognition from the organisation, additionally enhancing the individual's feeling of relatedness, because they receive confirmation that their achievements or skills have been seen and appreciated and are in line with the goals of the organisation. These findings support the findings in the VISKA initiative, where refugees confirm that "being seen" has boosted their motivation and confidence to re-enter education in their new environment (Alfsen et al., 2020, p. 78).

In nearly all of the organisations interviewed, it was currently the employer who decided which training employees would take. Courses were provided according to industry regulations (some courses were obligatory), others, such as Norwegian courses, were offered to aid integration, whilst more expensive, external certifications were offered to employees as a reward. In self-determination theory, the use of rewards is linked to controlled, or extrinsic, motivation, and rewards are generally considered detrimental to autonomy and competence, the primary determinants of intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2017, p. 21). However, the facilitation of *autonomous* external motivation can be a valuable way for organisations to enhance motivation in the workplace (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 346). If incorporated into a system of smaller, attainable achievements, digital badges could be used to give job-seekers or employees a feeling of greater autonomy and control as they can select which badges (rewards) they would like to aim for. Instead of training, and thus achievement, being exclusively controlled by the employer, by designing digital badges which not only focus on course fulfilment but also acknowledge work performance or other skills evidenced, more employees would be given the opportunity to achieve recognition. Being able to choose and aim for different badges may increase motivation, enhancing not only their autonomy, but also mastery, since they set their own badge targets, and relatedness to the organisation.

A continuous focus on the competence and the well-being of employees is a critical element of any successful organisation, but, as suggested in the National skills strategy, it may be necessary for organisations to actively motivate and engage employees in increasing their workplace skills through continued training (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 22). Results from my interviews confirmed that all of the organisations saw the main advantages of digital

badges to be connected with motivation and with making skills more visible to the organisation, to potential employers, and to the individual.

As discussed above, digital badges, in light of both self-determination and self-efficacy theories could be used to motivate lower-skilled employees to engage in and persist with workplace training, both raising their competence and productivity, but also helping them to build a portable portfolio of their skills which would help to safeguard their future inclusion in working life. As we have seen, work experience is a valuable asset in the recruitment process, and whilst documentation does not seem to be a requirement, and references are of debateable value, a digital portfolio of non-formal and informal learning achievements may bridge the gap between a credentialism approach and subjective evaluation.

For job-seekers with the connector organisations, digital badges were viewed as a way of making their personal attributes visible not only to potential employers, but equally importantly to themselves, raising their self-awareness and confidence, which may facilitate their access to the workforce.

7.3 Concerns with the digital badge concept

While there is a sound theoretical argument for digital badges increasing employee motivation, the informants raised some areas which they felt were problematic for digital badges, particularly if used as a tool during the recruitment process. These concerns are discussed here under the sub-chapters of credibility, standardisation and resources.

7.3.1 Credibility

A vital aspect for the acceptance of any proof of skills or competencies is the belief that the documentation can be trusted. The value in a credential is based on whether the receiver trusts the claim which is made (Virke, 2020, p. 65). Trust can be contingent on a number of factors, and one of the issues reported with the current system for the validation of prior learning (VPL) in Norway is that assessment is carried out by different bodies which have differing degrees of knowledge about assessment (Cedefop, 2021, p. 11). This can lead to a lack of interest and acceptance for VPL in the labour market with Olsen and colleagues (2018, p.157) reporting that their findings indicate that employers do not trust job applicants who present a certificate of validation of prior learning (*Realkompetansevurdering*) from a

municipality with the general suspicion being that VPL is “a kind of easy way to get a qualification” (Alfsen et al., 2020, p. 66). This finding clearly has implications for digital badges which, in theory, have no restrictions on who has the authority to issue a badge.

Whilst my findings revealed different practices between the employers with regards to how stringent their policies were for checking references, all of the informants expressed a concern that a digital badge may not be trustworthy, as, due to the nature of an open credentialing system, “anyone” can issue a digital badge. Credibility in a badge therefore seems not to lie exclusively in the digital badge itself, but rather in the credibility of the issuing or validating organisation, thus supporting the conclusions of CEDEFOP (2021, p. 11).

A further distinction that may be made when considering trust may be the achievement for which the digital badge has been issued. Although personal attributes were one of the most important hiring criteria when considering applicants for low-skilled positions, most of my informants were sceptical of either referees or digital badges being used to attest to character traits, preferring to make the assessment themselves at interview. Gibbons (2016, p. 136) reported that his employer informant felt that badges earned for specific skills or behaviours needed to be “tested” through performance over a period of time in the workplace, and could not be taken at face value. Digital badges which are issued for fulfilment of measurable criteria, for example punctuality or attendance, may be therefore be easier for employers to trust than badges which are earned for skills or attributes that have been subjectively appraised.

An interesting response from a connector organisation was the concern that a job seeker bearing too many digital badges may be treated with scepticism by employers as the digital badges may indicate, or be interpreted as, a lack of formal competence or gaps in the candidate’s CV. She opined that the job seeker may be viewed as less serious than a job seeker with formal competence, and the digital badges may emphasise any lack of formal schooling. This observation is very important, not only for the individuals bearing digital badges, but also for the whole concept of validating informal and non-formal learning. Whilst digital badges are widely considered as a tool for showcasing non-academic skills or attributes, the value of digital badges may become diluted if they are awarded too easily, thus supporting the impression that VPL is an inferior route to accreditation.

Recognition is a theme which regularly appears in the literature around digital badges. Digital credentials are worth little to the earner if they are not recognised or understood in the places where earners wish, intend or need to use them. Whilst educational institutions and NGOs researched by BadgEurope were generally positive to the concept of digital badges, these organisations do not see any value in implementing a system which will not benefit their users (BadgEurope, 2022). None of my informants had encountered digital badges previously, their only experience of a similar concept coming from apps used for fitness or language learning. Research in other countries has confirmed similar findings in relation to recognition, with positive reactions to the concept, but little actual awareness of digital badges in the labour market (i.e., Raish & Rimland, 2016, Perkins & Pryor, 2021). One informant suggested that if a candidate had a digital badge on their application it may indicate that they were “forward thinking and up to date with trends,” but it seems that a digital badge would be construed rather as a novelty than a necessity in the recruitment process, or as one informant articulated “nice to have, not need to have.”

Digital badge systems that are found today generally occur in badge eco-systems, with institutions developing their own digital badges and issuing them to earners based on internal assessment criteria. Digital badges are used within the institution and have an accepted value for the users at different levels within that eco-system. As commented by Farmer and West (2016), achieving external recognition for digital badges can prove problematic, as other organisations may have standards, requirements or objectives which do not align with the issuing authority. The problem of validating skills and competences between organisations is well-documented and leads to questions of shared descriptors and shared taxonomies.

7.3.2 Standardisation

In the NIFU Report on validation of prior learning, Olsen and colleagues (2018, p. 164) concluded that validation of prior learning was necessary in certain areas of working life, not least for employees. The report does however refer to earlier research on VPL in Norway which points out the challenges with applying learning outcomes for formal education from the National Qualifications Framework to learning outcomes in the workplace (Olsen et al., 2018, p.39). This issue was also mentioned by Buchem and colleagues (2019, p. 17) who report that HR experts in Germany currently doubt whether formal certification accurately captures an individual’s competence profile.

One of the concerns voiced by several informants was how badges could be interpreted. For a digital badge to be useful in the recruitment process, there needs to be clarity for the employer about what has been done to receive a badge. Not only do the criteria for gaining a badge need to be clearly outlined, but a digital badge must accurately reflect the level of competence for which it has been awarded. As pointed out by several informants, even internal training courses often occur at several levels, so there is a need to be able to clearly distinguish between the learning outcomes of, for example, different First Aid courses taken in a workplace. Whilst digital badges allow for this metadata to be stored within the badge, there is a clear need for the issuers of such badges to use a shared taxonomy for describing the skills attained.

One of the suggestions in the Skills Reform is that work communities themselves can evaluate the need for a shared sectoral skills standard and take initiatives for describing both the skills acquired and the evaluation of these competencies (Meld.St.14 (2019-2020), p. 79). The *Balancing Act* project has already focussed on creating a skills standard which can be used by different employers within the retail sector, however, even with just three pilot organisations, skills for what is ostensibly the same position are interpreted and appraised differently (Skjerve, 2020, p. 33). This highlights the challenge of standardising informal learning acquired in the workplace, even within a single sector.

Although the issue of standardisation is problematic, using digital badges to validate workplace learning would facilitate transfers between employers within a sector, offering employees a portable means to document their workplace learning.

According to the European Commission (2022, p. 10), the establishment of a successful system for micro-credentialing is dependent on collaboration between regional and national authorities, education and training organisations, and sectoral and cross-industry social dialogue which includes the private and public sectors. Although broader, this emphasis on cross-organisational cooperation is reflected in the suggestion in the Skills Reform for sectors to establish common standards for branch specific competence ((Meld. St. 14 (2019-2020), p. 79).

7.3.3 Resource issues

Implementation of new systems are inevitably resource-intensive, and systems which aim to offer validation of learning require resources at many levels (Alfsen et al., 2020, p.71). While the concerns of credibility and standardization are widely discussed within the broader topic of skills validation, there is little research on what employers see as challenges for the implementation of digital badges in their own organizations.

These challenges refer to more practical concerns which, although they will be highly dependent on the size, resources and nature of the organisation, are worth noting.

Without exception, time was the common limiting factor for the employer informants, and constant pressures in a difficult labour market left little time for the implementation of new systems. Interoperability and integration with existing systems were also mentioned, this aspect having an effect on both time and financial resources. Whilst the functions of the informants varied, there was generally a positive acceptance of digitalization, with the informants both acknowledging and accepting that digital solutions could be beneficial both to the organisation and to the employees.

In conclusion, it should be noted that none of the issues raised were viewed as pivotal, and apprehensions about credibility were much more evident than those about the practical implementation of a digital badge system.

7.4 Limitations and weaknesses in the study

Although digital badges have been in use for more than a decade, and there is growing global awareness of micro-credentialing, one of the main findings of my research was that the concept of digital badges was unknown to all of my informants. Even though the information and video clip explaining the concept were sent in advance, not all participants had viewed this prior to the interviews, resulting in slightly differing structures in the discussions.

Although flexibility is a benefit of semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2015, p. 468), participants' insights into, and preconceptions of, the digital badge concept were therefore varied, depending on whether they had viewed the film, or whether they required an explanation from myself, which then lacked a visual representation. There was a notable difference in the preparedness of those who had pre-viewed the film clip and those who had not, which could have been overcome by ensuring that all participants viewed the same film

clip either before or during the interview. It was however only during the interviews that this was revealed, and the interviewees' time limitations resulted in my choosing to explain the concept, rather than showing the film clip at that time. In contrast to the connector organisations, all of the employer organisation interviewees stated that they were under extreme time pressure in their respective positions, possibly explaining why it was generally this group of interviewees that had not viewed the video clip in advance.

A further coincidental difference between the interviews with the two groups, employers and connector organisations, was the form of the interview. The six interviews with employers were conducted as one-to-one interviews, whilst two of the connector organisations had two and three participants respectively. Again, this may be explained by time pressures, however it did result in a slightly different interview situation.

A weakness of the study is the time aspect of the research. As the interviews were conducted in a short space of time, this was not a process study and was therefore influenced by the labour market at the time of the interviews. Norway – and the rest of the world – was returning to normality following the Covid-19 pandemic which had heavily affected the employment sector since March 2020, and employers were experiencing a lack of available labour. The organisations interviewed expressed massive difficulties in finding staff, and several of them acknowledged that their recruitment processes lacked the usual background and reference checks of potential candidates. Several participants commented that if candidates met up to the interview, they were more or less guaranteed a job offer, which obviously has implications for the necessity of digital badges as a tool for evidencing prior learning or personal attributes. This labour shortage may therefore have influenced findings as it reflects the post-pandemic selection process rather than being representative of recruitment in a stable labour market.

8.0 Summary and Conclusion

My aim with this thesis was to gain an understanding of how the labour market in Norway evaluated applicants for unskilled positions and to ascertain how employers in Norway perceive Digital Open Badges as a potential tool for skills recognition to facilitate inclusion in the workforce.

None of the informants in the study were familiar with digital badges, a finding which indicates that there is a strong need for raised awareness in Norway of digital credentialing's affordances. Although statistics reflect that unemployment is highest among those with lower formal education, my findings indicate that a lack of documented schooling does not seem to pose a barrier to inclusion in working life in Norway in the current labour market. Although the concept of digital badges was met with positivity by employers and connector organisations alike, informants did not envisage that digital badges would change their current hiring practices which, to a large degree, are based on appraisals of candidates at interview.

Earlier research indicates that current practices of validating prior learning and workplace learning are inadequate, with limited information accessible for the target group and limited interest from the labour market. Both employers and connector organisations interviewed were interested in using digital badges to validate non-formal learning in workplace training, and informal skills exhibited during internships. Connector organisations showed particular interest in the motivational effect that the recognition of skills would have on their job-seekers, believing that raising job-seekers' awareness of their inherent resources would increase their self-efficacy. Employers placed more emphasis on digital badges as a method of systemisation of workplace training, but were also of the opinion that employees would be motivated by achieving recognition for their learning which could enhance their productivity at work and their feelings of relatedness to the workplace. If those with a low attachment to working life can gain recognition for the competences and skills which they already possess, this will strengthen their position in the labour market, increasing their value to employers and conceivably increasing their motivation to gain more digital badges. One of the benefits of digital credentials is that the system is easily accessible and badges are portable, allowing badge earners to control their own portfolios of achievement, thus empowering the individual, facilitating mobility and boosting autonomy.

Digital badges are largely found in eco-systems, centring around an issuer organisation, with many peripheral stakeholders. For digital badges to be widely accepted, and accepted outside of these eco-systems, engagement and resources are necessary on many different levels. However, there may be benefits to be gained from introducing digital badges, even on a smaller scale. Findings from this project indicate that, whilst a formal validation of non-formal and informal learning may be difficult to achieve until there is greater recognition of digital badges, it may not actually be necessary if the aim with utilising digital badges is to motivate job-seekers and employees to better include them in working life.

A lack of formal schooling is not an indication that a job seeker is weak in resources. It may be, however, that an easily accessible, universal system needs to be introduced giving those with a low attachment to working life an equal opportunity to showcase their resources, irrespective of the arena in which these skills have been gained.

8.1 Contribution and suggestions for further research areas

As ascertained in the initial review of the literature on digital badges, there is limited empirical research to date on the effect of using digital badges as a tool for facilitating inclusion in the workplace, however there is a range of theoretical literature on using digital badges for motivation, and evidence of digital badges in a number of different contexts. There has been little research on the employer perspective of badges, particularly in relation to the recruitment process for jobs with no formal entry requirements. This thesis is the first paper investigating digital badges in a Norwegian context. It contributes to the body of research on digital badges by providing an insight into employer perspectives on using digital them as a tool for inclusion to working life, an area which is presently under-researched. Despite the differing contextual backgrounds, the findings from the employer interviews are very much aligned with research on graduate recruitment processes in other countries, strengthening the evidence to suggest that digital badges could fill a gap in the current systems for making visible non-formal and informal skills and learning.

However, it must be conceded that this research was, at least to some extent, influenced by the post-pandemic labour market, and results reflected the labour shortage at the time.

Repeating the study in times of labour market stability may yield different results, particularly when considering the recruitment and selection process for potential employees.

The interview sample of nine organisations was, although indicative, a relatively limited selection of employers. The introduction and implementation of digital badges, as discussed, requires a much larger eco-system, so a study of other organisations to ascertain demand for a tool to recognise non-academic achievements and attributes would have benefits. Such organisations might include policy makers, education providers (both formal and non-formal), and educational advocacy organisations, as these are all stakeholders in a digital badge eco-system.

This thesis has touched on previous initiatives for the recognition of prior experiential non-formal and informal learning, however it has not evaluated the outcomes of these enterprises in terms of their compatibility with digital badges. Neither has there been comparison with similar digital badge projects, as there is little empirical data for digital badges as a tool for gaining inclusion to working life. A natural progression from this study would be to implement a pilot study with digital badges in one of the organisations which participated in my interviews. A case study of this kind would allow the findings to be tested and an evaluation made about whether the perceived affordances for digital badges can be realised in practice. It could show the effects on employees from the target group, either within their own workplace or in applications to other organisations using the digital badges they have attained as evidence of their resources.

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Appendix 1 – NSD Approval

[Meldeskjema](#) / [Labour Market perceptions of Open Digital Badges as a tool for recog...](#) / Vurdering

Vurdering

Referansenummer	Type	Dato
373347	Standard	12.09.2022

Prosjekttittel

Labour Market perceptions of Open Digital Badges as a tool for recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Universitetet i Oslo / Det utdanningsvitenskapelige fakultet / Institutt for pedagogikk

Prosjektansvarlig

Anne Line Wittek

Student

Susan Elizabeth Simonsen

Prosjektperiode

15.11.2021 - 31.12.2022

Kategorier personopplysninger

Alminnelige

Rettslig grunnlag

Samtykke (art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene kan starte så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det rettslige grunnlaget gjelder til 31.12.2022.

[Meldeskjema](#) **Kommentar**

Personverntjenester har vurdert endringen i prosjektslutt dato.

Vi har nå registrert 31.12.2022 som ny slutt dato for behandling av personopplysninger.

Vi vil følge opp ved ny planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til videre med prosjektet!

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

”Labour Market perceptions of Open Digital Badges as a tool for recognition of non-formal and informal learning”?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å kartlegge perspektiver om og bruk av Digital Badges som et verktøy i det Norske arbeidsmarkedet. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Prosjektet har som formål å kartlegge perspektiver rundt Open Digital Badges fra arbeidsmarkedet. Vi ønsker å øke innsikt i hvorvidt digital badges kan brukes for å styrke posisjonen i det Norske arbeidsmarkedet for de med lav eller lite formell utdanning som står i fare for å stå utenfor arbeidslivet. Open Digital Badges kan brukes til å dokumentere uformell og ikke-formell læring og kompetanse, og prosjektet har til hensikt å undersøke kjennskap til og inntrykk av digital badges innen Norske organisasjoner som jobber med rekruttering og inkludering av personer i sårbare grupper i arbeidsmarkedet.

Datainnsamling er en del av en masteroppgave, i tillegg til at prosjektet er tilknyttet et Erasmus + prosjekt: Scaling & Implementation Plan for Digital Badges across Europe, Project Number 2020-1-DE02-KA204-007700.

De overordnede funnene fra intervjuene blir delt med partnere i Erasmus + prosjektet - Stichting Bloom Foundation, Nederland, og Relevance, Tyskland, men individuelle svar blir ikke delt.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Det utdanningsvitenskapelige fakultetet ved Universitetet i Oslo er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

For å kartlegge persepsjoner av Digital Badge konseptet innen det norske arbeidsmarkedet, er vi særlig interessert i å komme i kontakt med de som jobber med relevante jobbsøkere – dem som står i fare for å være utenfor arbeidslivet i Norge. I forbindelse med dette, ble du kontaktet på bakgrunn av ditt arbeid med rekruttering og / eller veiledning av personer som kan ha utfordringer med å bevise sin kompetanse gjennom formelle kvalifikasjoner. Utvalg til denne undersøkelsen blir 10 bedrifter både i offentlig og privat sektor.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det at vi vil ha et intervju med deg om hvilke type dokumentasjon din arbeidsplass krever fra jobbsøkere, i tillegg til din kjennskap til og erfaring med Digital Badges. Det vil ta cirka 45 minutter. Vi vil ta notater og gjøre lydopptak av intervjuet for å sikre kvaliteten / nøyaktigheten av data som blir innhentet. Lydopptakene vil bli transkribert og slettet.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg. Du kan trekke ditt samtykke tilbake ved å sende det skriftlig til meg på susanesi@student.uv.uio.no.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Tilgang til lydopptakene blir begrenset til undervisningsleder ved Institutt for pedagogikk, Anne Line Wittek og Susan Simonsen. Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine erstattes med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra lydopptakene.

Overordnede resultater fra de samlet intervjuene blir delt med partnere i Erasmus + prosjektet, men partnere vil ikke ha tilgang til verken lydopptak, samtykkeskjemaet eller andre opplysningene om deg.

I masteroppgaven, vil organisasjonenes opplysninger bli anonymisert.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Opplysningene anonymiseres når oppgaven er godkjent, noe som etter planen er 31.08. 2022.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Universitetet i Oslo har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Universitetet i Oslo, Institutt for pedagogikk, Anne Line Wittek

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 53 21 15 00.

Med vennlig hilsen

Anne Line Wittek
(Forsker/veileder)

Susan Simonsen

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *Labour Market perceptions of Open Digital Badges as a tool for recognition of non-formal and informal learning*, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta i intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Intervju guide (semi-strukturert) - bedrifter

Organisasjonens bakgrunnsinformasjon (Dette vil hentes inn i utvalgsprosessen)

- Hva slags virksomhet er du en del av?
- Hvilken bransje opererer virksomheten din i?
- Hva er størrelsen på virksomheten din? (antall ansatte, antall kontorer, omsetning osv.)
- Er virksomhet lokalt, regionalt, nasjonalt, internasjonalt eller globalt?
- Hva er din rolle i virksomheten?

Rekrutteringsprosess og anerkjennelse av læring

- Kan du beskrive en typisk ansettelsesprosess hos dere?
- Til hvilke fagområder ansetter dere?
- Bedrifter: Tar dere inn jobbsøkere uten arbeidserfaring og/eller utdanning? NAV eller lignende: Hva slags personer plasserer dere i arbeid?
- Ber du om dokumentasjon på akademiske kvalifikasjoner fra kandidater?
- Hva slags ferdigheter blant de ansatte er de viktigste for din virksomhet (for fremtiden)?
- Ber du om dokumentasjon på disse ferdighetene i form av referanser eller lignende?
- Hvordan sikrer virksomheten at det er mangfold og inkludering i ansettelsesprosessen?
- Hva slags faglig utvikling og opplæring får de ansatte tilbud om? Hvordan blir dette anerkjent / akkreditert?
- Har virksomheten spesifikke tiltak for å beholde ansatte i virksomheten? (utviklingstiltak?)

Om å matche kandidater til arbeidsmarkedet

- Hva slags kompetansebehov vil virksomheten ha om 5 år?
- Hvilke ferdigheter anser du som viktige fremover? (språkferdigheter, datakunnskaper, kommunikasjonsevner osv.)

Om Digital Badges (hva det er og hvordan kan det fungere for deg?)

(Har du hatt tid til å se gjennom filmsnutten om Digital Badges? – Hvis ikke, spille av)

- Hadde du hørt om Digital Badges før vi kontaktet deg? hvis ja - hvor / hvordan?
- Hva er ditt inntrykk av Digital Badge konseptet?
- Ser du for deg at Digital Badges kan være et verktøy som kan brukes av organisasjonen din? På hvilken måte?
- Er det noen spesielle fordeler du kan se?
- Er det noen spesielle ulemper du kan se?
- Hvis Digital Badges gjorde det mulig for deg å søke etter nye ansatte - for eksempel på jobbsøkersider, ville dette vært av interesse?
- Hvilke faktorer ville være viktige å vurdere for å ta stilling til å bruk Digital Badges i ansettelsespraksisen i virksomheten?
- Hva ville gjøre bruken av Digital Badges til en suksess for virksomheten?
- Hva kan blokkere virksomheten fra å bruke dem?
- Hvis en søker presenterte et Digital Badge som et bevis på ferdigheter, ville du være forberedt på å godta det som dokumentasjon på evne /kvalifikasjon?
- Hvis et Digital Badge kom med en anbefaling/anerkjennelse - fra en skole, et selskap eller en person, ville dette gitt mer validitet til merkets verdi etter din mening?
- La oss gå igjennom en tenkt situasjon der virksomheten har bestemt seg for at du vil ta i bruk Open Badges - hva vil trinnene være?
- Vet du hva konkurrentene dine planlegger / gjør / vurderer i denne sammenhengen?
- Hvis andre virksomheter iverksetter Digital Badges, vil dette ha en effekt på vurderingen av Badges?

Problem å løse? DB som løsning?

- Ser du noen utfordringer knyttet til det å tiltrekke, utvikle eller beholde ansatte der bruk av Digital Badges kunne hjelpe?