Know where your towel is: other competencies can be demonstrated through digital credentials

Simone Ravaioli and Gill Ferrell
[1] Digitary, Italy
[2] IMS Global Learning Consortium, France
Simone.ravaioli@digitary.net, gferrell@imsglobal.org

Abstract

Open Badges are verifiable and shareable records of achievement widely used to demonstrate skills to potential employers. This paper looks at the current status of Open Badges globally and in higher education and discusses the potential of increased use of digital microcredentials to support major European policy initiatives.

1 Background

This is one of a series of papers for the EUNIS audience with titles inspired by the science fiction works of Douglas Adams. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (Adams 1979) is a cult science fiction work that follows the fortunes of an Englishman, Arthur Dent, left to explore the galaxy, in his pajamas and dressing gown, when Earth is destroyed to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Arthur has to develop various new survival skills on his journey. He is however advised that the most useful competence an intergalactic hitchhiker can have is to always "know where your towel is".

These days learners have many ways to demonstrate their skills and competencies and gain recognition for both formal and informal learning. This paper looks at Open Badges and the technical standard that underpins the process of accrediting learning in this way.

2 What are Open Badges?

Open Badges are information-rich visual records of verifiable achievements earned by recipients and easily shared on the web and via social media.

Open Badges is the world's leading format for digital badges. Open Badges is not a specific product or platform, but a type of digital badge that is verifiable, portable, and packed with information about skills and achievements.

The Open Badges standard describes a method for packaging information about accomplishments, embedding it into portable image files as digital badges, and includes resources for web-based validation and verification. Open Badges describe who earned it, who issued it, the criteria required, and in many cases even the evidence and demonstrations of the relevant skills.

The Open Badges standard was originally developed by the Mozilla Foundation. Since 2017 managing and advancing the standard has been the responsibility of IMS Global Learning Consortium, a non-profit membership organization that develops and manages a variety of educational standards for data interoperability.
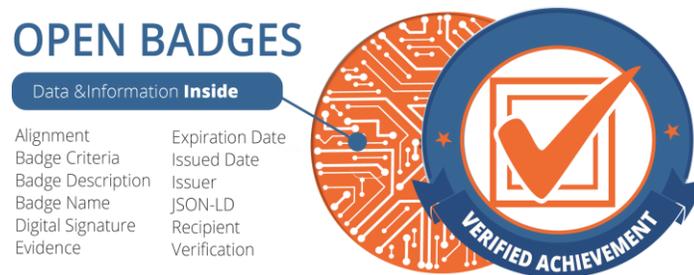

Figure 1: Description of Open Badges. This image is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

In 2020 IMS Global Learning Consortium and Credential Engine surveyed a range of global badge technology providers (including providers in Finland and Italy) and found an 80% increase over 2018 figures in terms of badges issued. The respondents accounted for some 43.3 million badges issued worldwide.[*]

3   Relevance to higher education

The relevance of Open Badges to skills-based/vocational education is evident. There has been interest from the higher education sector in the potential of Open Badges to help students demonstrate their employability for many years (e.g. Glover & Latif 2013) but use of the approach is still far from being mainstream in this area. A 2015 survey in UK higher education (Boxwell 2015) found that institutions were more likely to use open badges for staff continuing professional development than to evidence student competences.

The higher education experience is about more than simply gaining a qualification and Open Badges can be an ideal way to show skills gained through extra-curricular activities. These are often the kind of skills most in demand by employers seeking to choose between many well-qualified graduates.

---

[*] These figures exclude open badges issued via Moodle due to the tens of thousands of decentralized Moodle installations worldwide.

4 Open Badges in Europe

As part of a Europe-wide picture, the use of Open Badges can be even more valuable when linked to ESCO the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations framework. ESCO is a kind of multilingual dictionary describing, identifying and classifying professional occupations and skills relevant for the EU labor market and education and training area.

Supporting the take-up of micro-credentials was one of the flagship actions in the European Commission's 2020 European Skills Agenda (European Commission 2020) and a group of higher education experts was invited to develop a roadmap for this.

At the end of 2020, the European Commission committed to ensuring that the Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI) will be compatible with Open Badges and to develop a plan for this during 2021.

Gaining experience with Open Badges now will be a valuable step for institutions who will find micro and digital credentialling an increasingly important part of accrediting learning in the future.

5 Get involved

If you are interested in issuing, displaying or hosting Open Badges, the Open Badges standard is a free and open specification available for adoption.

The EUNIS Learning and Teaching special interest group is interested in this topic so please get in touch if you have a story to tell or experience to share.

6 References

Adams, D. (1979) The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. New York: Harmony Books.

Boxwell. G. (2015) Implementation of Open Badges in education. ALT-C Blog. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from: Retrieved February 20, 2021, from: https://altc.alt.ac.uk/blog/2015/06/implementation-of-open-badges-in-education/

European Commission (2020) European Skills Agenda. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223

GLOVER, I. and LATIF, F. (2013) Investigating perceptions and potential of open badges in formal higher education. In: Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2013. AACE, Chesapeake, VA, 1398-1402. ISBN 9781939797032. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266852980_Investigating_Perceptions_and_Potential_of_Open_Badges_in_Formal_Higher_Education

IMS Global Learning Consortium (2020) Badge Count 2020 report. Retrieved February 20, 2021, from: http://content.imsglobal.org/badge-count-2020/badge-count-2020/

7 Author biographies

Simone Ravaioli is Director of Strategic Partnerships at Digitary. From 2010 to 2014, he chaired the Digital Student Data Portability Task Force of the EAIE that led to the creation of the Groningen Declaration Network in 2012. He is an elected member of: the ESCO Maintenance Committee for the European Union's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion; the EU's Blockchain Observatory and Forum for the Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology; the advisory board of the Open Recognition Alliance; and the steering committee of the PESC Competencies and Credentials User Group. In 2019, he received the PESC Distinguished Service Award for long-standing contribution to interoperability and open standards to support global student mobility.
https://www.linkedin.com/in/simoneravaioli/

Gill Ferrell has led the EUNIS Learning and Teaching SIG since 2009. She also has an interest in data and information management. In March 2021 she joined IMS Global Learning Consortium as IMS Europe Program Director.
https://www.linkedin.com/in/gillferrell/